

**MICHAEL  
BARD**

**A HORSE  
OF MANY  
COLOURS**



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**MICHAEL BARD**

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## FOREWORD ~ WILL A. SANBORN

MICHAEL W. "MORGAN" BARD was an avid follower and participant in the science fiction, anthropomorphic animals, and transformation fandoms, as well as a prolific writer. Friends remember collaborating on story ideas and long talks on subjects ranging the wide gamut of the genres. He had a great love for ideas and stories, and that shines through in his writing. Michael lived in Toronto, and his love for that city and his Canadian pride are also evident in many of his stories.

Michael passed away on the nineteenth of March 2010 due to complications of an aneurysm. He left this world far too soon at the age of forty-four. Michael left behind many acquaintances and fans, who not only mourned the loss of a good friend, but also all those stories which he did not get a chance to create.

This collection of Michael's fiction was created through the efforts of his friends and artistic collaborators in remembrance of him and his works. In accordance with his family's wishes, the royalties from this book will be donated in his name to the Heart and Stroke center at Toronto Western through the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario. ([www.heartandstroke.on.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.on.ca))



## FOREWORD ~ PHIL GUESZ

MICHAEL WAS A TORONTO FUR and a gentle, artistic soul. I suspect he found his true home at last in the furry fandom after much lonely wandering. He was a classicist in his literary tastes and in other aspects of his life as well. He loved discussing anything to do with ancient Greece, particularly in terms of their military history and prowess. Clarke and Heinlein and Lovecraft, among many others, were his favorite authors. Though I consider myself fairly knowledgeable about the early years of SF, his familiarity with the subject could best be described as encyclopedic.

My friend Michael had a way of combining his loves and talents. For example, he made his living for several years painting Greek miniatures for wargamers, with an extreme emphasis on historical accuracy and authenticity. He also became an avid fursuiter – I can remember him spending well over a year trying to work out the ideal way to build a set of working, wearable hooves. He demanded perfection of himself in his costuming, or as near to it as he could achieve. This was the case in his literary efforts as well, and his pains weren't wasted.

Michael was taken from us *far* too young – his skills as both a writer and costumer were waxing by the week. His fursuit-characters are silent now, without Michael to give them life. But the stories yet live, and I believe that these are therefore what the fandom will remember him by. And you know what? I think he'd want it that way....





## FOREWORD ~ JASON GILLESPIE

I AM TRYING TO THINK ABOUT what to say of our friend and I find it very difficult. Michael was a good man who was always trying to do things for others that he knew they'd like, and things that they never asked, nor would ever ask of him. That sort of generosity always impressed me and endeared me to him. He never stopped thinking about others.

The other thing he never stopped thinking about was his crafts. Be they his models, his fursuits, or his stories, he strove to make them as believable and as realistic as possible; as close to perfection as he could come was his goal and always his goal. I recall the time he tried to design a map of Metamor Keep and its surrounding environs. There are so many contradictory details in the various stories and in the interpretations brought by different authors that he finally had to give up despite his heroic efforts.

It's just one more reason why when you pick up one of his stories, you know you're going to get something that was built as well as he could make it. And when it comes to writing, Michael knew what to do to tell a great story that would tantalize mind, tear out heart, and inquire the soul.

He was a dear friend. He always will be. What I truly wish to say about Michael I cannot. Not in this context. His soul was dear to me, revealed in his acts in life toward myself and others. I never knew the depths of his soul. But I believe that there is something in there that is worthy of persisting.





FOREWORD ~ JESSIE TRACER / ELECTRIC KEET

POLITE DISTANCE KILLED MICHAEL BARD before he had a chance to die on his own – from my perspective, at least. It's my own damned fault.

I was on holiday in Boston, engaged in the sororal tradition of anecdotes and gossip, when I received the news of his unfortunate end. I explained to my sister – in an ideal world, she'd have been my blood sister, but genetics and time respect nothing like wishes – just who this man was. "A writer with intense potential," I said. "Passionate, creative, difficult, and odd in all the right ways." I told her how I'd had the honour of typesetting one of his published pieces, and how I'd playfully argued with him over his choices of punctuation. I told her how he'd helped me in my own writing, pointing me in the direction of the resources he'd used to bring a kiss of versimilitude to his own science fiction. I told her how we would chat online, batting surreal puns back and forth like kittens who refused to grow old.

"Sounds like he was a good friend," my sister said.

"He should have been," I admitted. Then, I told her how I'd never let myself get too terribly close. A writer is not merely influenced but *powered* by passion and pain, and he was an irrepressible writer. Getting closer would have meant the hard work of knowing his passion and pain. I thought I was too busy to take that much more on, so I kept a polite distance.

My work on this final anthology serves many functions. It's a fond memorial. It's the payment of respects. It's a friendly final word on the debate over his ellipses and em-dashes. Most of all, it's a reminder to myself – and to you, who hold up this book and thus are willing to see some of another sapient being's passion and pain – that it's worth knowing a person better, and better not to kill them off before their time.



## HOW DID THE COELACANTH *REALLY* SURVIVE?

KASANA SOLANTH WALKED INTO THE POD of Dr Kynarhan, the head of ecological sciences for the free peoples. He stood up and clasped his hands together and bowed in greeting, as did she, and then sat his unusually dark green form behind his desk and motioned for Kasana to sit in front.

"Dr Solanth," he began. "I take it you know why I asked you here?"

"I think so. It's about the Coelacanth Project."

"Exactly. We're finally ready to begin reintroducing the species. It's our duty after the disasters caused to the Earth by our earlier civilizations." He sighed. "I only wish we'd made it into space before the ecological deterioration forced us to concentrate our efforts here."

"I've heard rumours that it's been decided to start with the oceans, and in particular with the coelacanth. Was that due to my concerns?"

"Mostly. Your articles have been a bit... colourful, shall we say."

"I prefer passionate."

"Whatever. Anyway, we did finally decide to start the repopulation with a single small species as a trial."

"Wonderful. And my other request about having somebody breed and monitor it?"

"I was finally able to convince them of your arguments." He stood up, brought down a old, leatherbound book, and carefully placed it on his desk. He looked back up at Kasana, "You're really sure you want to go through with this?"

She leaned back in her chair, letting its simple biological form adjust to her back. Did she want it? Did she want to give up her race? Would she still be herself? "How did they solve the intelligence problem?"



"It was actually quite simple. The plan is to have the actual mind divided into individual neurons throughout the body, all linked. The 'brain' would only act as a switching centre."

Kasana nodded. "And my young?"

"That's the problem. There are still some smaller fish, and a few of the larger predators, who survived our errors, and because of them our earlier attempts at reintroduction have failed. The decision has been to let the intelligence breed true."

She was shocked. "What? Why?" What disasters would their intelligence cause in the future?

"The plan is for the intelligence to initially help the species to survive long enough to become viable. Then, since we made intelligence a recessive trait, it should breed itself out as there will be no real need for it."

"You hope. Why are you and the council willing to take that risk?"

"It has been decided that the need to get moving with the reintroduction outweighs any risks." He looked straight into her yellow eyes. "You never did answer me. Are you still sure you want to go through with this? Absolutely sure?"

"I think so." Why was she so unsure? She had worked for this for the last fifteen years. Ever since she had first heard rumours of the reintroduction of the many species her race had driven to extinction. Often she had dreamed of it. So why was she hesitant?

"I need a definite answer. Once we introduce the tailored virus, there is no going back. Ever."

She sighed. Enough hesitation. She had worked towards this, and she was ready. "Yes. I am absolutely sure."

Dr Kynarhan sighed and slowly sat down. He opened the book on his desk to a marked page. On that page was an old picture of the last known coelacanth to survive. He looked back up at her. "This is what you will be. This is what you will be for the rest of your life. I have to ask and make sure that you are absolutely positive. I couldn't live with myself otherwise."

She looked down at the picture. It was of a large, beautiful, female, about two metres in length. Its scales and angular fins were all a dashing blue-black with white streaking towards the tail. It had its jaw fully opened, with its nostrils distended. She recognized the picture; it was of the last one ever caught. They had hoped to breed it but the pollution had rendered it sterile. She closed her eyes for a moment and then looked back up at Dr Kynarhan.

"Yes. I will. I'm ready."

Dr Kynarhan raised his three fingered hand and they pressed their

palms together. "The council thanks you for your sacrifice. As I know that you already have all your affairs in order, tomorrow morning at eighteen-hundred, go to the biology research centre here in the capital. Go and see Dr Dalerul and he will give you the injection and monitor the procedure."

They bowed and Kasana turned and left. All doubts had been banished from her mind. *Finally*, she thought. *Finally my dreams can come true*. The dreams that she had had since she had hatched.

KASANA WAS UNABLE TO SLEEP that night, and ended up watching various broadcasts. She ignored the general news, the almost lies about the state of the earth, and the one talk show about possible asteroid collisions. Instead, she watched nature shows. Most were filmed almost a century ago, and then enhanced as technology improved. She wanted to remember as much about her old life as possible before she left it behind. What she remembered most from that night was the footage that stuck her most – that of hunters of two centuries ago shooting the last of the wild crested lambeosaurines, and the beast's honking as they died.

Finally morning came and Kasana decided to walk to the biology centre. The capital was still small, as the population was still recovering from the decimation caused by disease and famine over the last century. It took her only an hour in the pre-dawn light to reach the centre – the only life she saw was a few birds just beginning their hunt for food. Most of the birds had come to the cities where they could live quite well off the free people's waste.

She opened the door and went into the public hall. It was always open as it displayed many of the extinct creatures, some extinct long ago, and others just recently. She passed the preserved remains of various ceratopsians and went over to the tank where a preserved coelacanth was displayed and just looked at it. She lost herself in thought. Soon, she would look like that.

She didn't hear the claw taps behind her and was startled when she heard a voice. "Dr Solanth?"

She gasped and turned around. It was a large male, light green in colour, and obviously very old. She recognized him as Dr Dalerul.

"Did I startle you? Somehow I expected to find you here."

"You did?"

"We know a lot more about you than you might think. Your research wasn't the only reason you were finally selected. Your state of mind was also considered. You are stable, but you have your dreams. You're by far the most likely to adapt."

"How do you know my dreams?"

He smiled, "You must learn not to talk in your sleep."

She glared at him in shock.

"Now come along. It's still a bit early, but we're ready for you now." He turned and walked towards an open door at the end of the hallway.

Kasana shrugged and followed him. The only sound was the clicking of their toeclaws on the marble floor. She followed Dr Dalerul down a hallway and past various rooms into a large and comfortable office. The office had once seemed large, but now all the walls were lined with shelves containing books and specimens. It smelled slightly of decay and damp. All the tables were covered with books and Dr Dalerul even had to move some from his chair onto the floor. He motioned for Kasana to sit down opposite him – fortunately her chair was bare.

When they were seated, Dr Dalerul began. "I'm told that you've accepted the transformation. That you are willing and able."

"Yes."

"Good. I just need to confirm your feelings."

He leaned down and Kasana heard a loud scraping as a drawer was opened. Dr Dalerul pulled out a small case and placed it on the one empty space on his desk and slammed the drawer shut. Then he opened the case. It contained a single syringe beside which was a large vial containing a greenish-black liquid. Dr Dalerul pulled out the vial and filled the syringe with a measured portion. He closed the case.

"This is your last chance. Once I inject you, there will be no turning back. Are you absolutely sure?"

Kasana looked at the syringe. There was her future. She had always hated needles, but this would be the last one. Ever. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Yes."

"Wonderful. This'll hurt only a little."

She still grimaced at the sharp prick at her elbow. Even though her eyes were closed, she could feel the coldness start to move up her arm and into her chest before it finally dissipated. She opened her eyes and watched Dr Dalerul clean and bandage the wound.

"It's done. You shouldn't notice anything for a while, but it's already started to work. Do you know how the process will proceed?"

"I've studied it thoroughly. After all, I've been preparing for this for a long time."

"Good. Then I'll take you to your room. You'll probably want to sleep as you were awake all night."

She stared at him. How long had they been watching her?

"Don't worry. We had to keep an eye on you to make sure you were committed. We're just being cautious. Now that the process has begun, all of the recordings are being destroyed."

"Thank you."

"If you need the washroom, and be warned that you will, a lot, just call for a nurse. It's the standard button arrangement. Any other questions?"

"No." She smiled. Now that it had begun, she realized how tired she was. "Let's go then. I think I'll fall asleep on your chair if I stay here much longer."

Dr Dalerul stood up and helped her up. He turned and she followed him out of his office and down a short hall to another door. Opening it, he motioned her in.

"Good night. Remember, buzz if you need anything."

She yawned and clasped his hand for a second. Then she turned and tumbled into bed.

SHE SLEPT WELL, UNAWARE OF THE CHANGES that were going on in her body. Finally she awoke, feeling bloated. She sniffed and gagged, and realized that she had already relieved herself all over the bed. And she had to go again. She breathed through her mouth and buzzed the nurse. Finally the nurse arrived and didn't look at all shocked.

"Don't look so guilty," the nurse said. "Dr Dalerul expected this to happen. Don't worry, in a month or so we'll move you to your tank and then it won't be so messy. I take it you have to go again?"

Kasana managed to nod.

THE NEXT MONTH WAS HELLISH. She didn't eat anything, only drank, as her body slowly got rid of its mass as she began her shrinkage to half her size. As expected, within a week her scales had begun to grow larger, and began to match a coelacanth's patterns. After three weeks she found she had to sleep on her side to be comfortable – she felt around and just managed to feel her new tail beginning to grow – her arms had shortened to the point where they could barely reach to check. She still made a mess of the bed every night when she slept, but had come to accept it philosophically. As the nurse had said, it was expected.

After four weeks her tail had stopped growing. It was only about ten centimetres in length, but the rest of her body would adapt to fit it. She could feel the small caudal and posterior caudal fins and could even move their ribs slightly. Now she knew what it was like to have a tail. By the fifth

week her legs had shrunk to only thirty centimetres or so in length, and she was beginning to feel dry. Her messes also became drier.

ONE MORNING DR DALERUL CAME TO SEE HER. "You'll be happy to know that everything is proceeding normally. We're going to move you to your tank today."

She'd wondered about that. She hadn't developed any kind of gills yet. Just in case they had just opened, she felt her neck, which she could barely reach. But she couldn't feel anything.

"They'll be a while yet. But don't worry, we have a respirator for you that we'll strap to your head. We haven't gone through all this to let you drown."

She managed a laugh. Hopefully the water would help since her whole body now felt dry and uncomfortable.

"We do have to do one thing though, before we put you in. We'll put you under while we implant a small sperm sac. It'll release a genetically different set of sperm once a year or so while you're fertile. That way you'll lay eggs that are already fertilized."

"Can we get it over with now?"

"Yes. Drink this, and you'll wake up in your new home." He handed her a glass.

She leaned forward to hold the glass, hearing her scales rasp against the bed. Its contents looked like water, but when she drank it, it tasted bitter – she barely managed to keep from spitting it out. She wanted to ask for water to wash out the taste, but couldn't stop her eyes from closing.

WHEN SHE AWOKE, HER BODY didn't feel dry anymore, for the first time in almost a week. She was breathing normally and could hear a roar of bubbles each time she exhaled. She could see them blurrily rise to the now forbidden surface. She could even see the tip of her mouth – her face had started to reform.

"Hello?" The bubbles obscured her sounds. She took a deep breath and shouted, "Anybody?" She looked around and saw someone leaning over the tank. The form was blurred.

"Are you awake?"

She heard a man's voice whisper throughout the tank. It sounded odd. It sounded a bit like Dr Dalerul, but deeper, and with weird resonances. "Yes!" she answered.

"Good. This is Dr Dalerul. Everything went fine. Do you feel okay?"



She tried to quiet her breathing and then tried to sense her body. She felt fine, not too hot and not too cool. She thought she could feel a dull ache in her chest, but she wasn't sure.

"I'm fine!"

"Good. You'll have to stay here. You'll need the respirator for another two months until your gills develop. We've put a monitor just outside so you can try and keep from being bored. Can you see it?"

She tried to turn herself around to look, but her legs and arms didn't help much. Then she remembered her tail and used it to turn around. She could see the monitor. It was blurry, but recognizable. "Yes!"

"Good. For now it's all you'll have, but in a month we'll need to start on your language lessons. Your body should be developed enough by then to make the sounds you need. Do you understand?"

"Yes! Can you turn it to the nature broadcast?"

OVER THE NEXT MONTH she watched the monitor. Her vision cleared until it was as sharp as it used to be. Her arms and legs continued to shorten, and the ends began to flatten into fins. Her claws disappeared completely. Her head continued to change and flatten, as did her chest. They adjusted her mask daily to keep it tight.

During the second month of her aquatic existence, she began her language lessons. She had helped to develop the code of clicks and hums that she could make that would be used to communicate with scientists that would come to visit her and monitor the growing population she would birth. She knew the language by heart, but had to learn how to make it with her new body. At first it was difficult, but as her body continued to change, it started to become easier.

Near the end of the second month her throat began to feel dry. She asked for a mirror and could see bumps forming on either side of her face. Her neck was now completely gone, her head merged with her chest. Her chest had thinned and fattened until now it was almost a cylinder. She could even see buds for the rest of her fins.

She was also beginning to lose the ability to talk. By the end of the month she could only talk in a whisper which nobody could hear. To her it sounded like the breathy rasp of an old man. Fortunately she could now communicate in her language of hums and clicks.

At the end of the week she awoke and could see blood in the water. She could no longer turn her head so she turned her body around and looked in the mirror but couldn't see anything wrong. She swam closer to the

edge of the tank and noticed three lines behind her head. Were those her gills? She clicked and hummed to call for a doctor.

A few minutes later she could see the figure of Dr Dalerul outside the tank. "Are you all right?"

"I think so, but what about the blood?" A computer translated her hums and clicks to normal words.

"Come closer. It should be your gills."

She managed to swim to the edge of the tank and turned her side to the edge. She could still see him as her eyes were now on the side of her head as it had begun to flatten. "I checked, it looks like them."

"Good, wonderful! And right on schedule." He rubbed his hands together. "Wait a few minutes and I'll get some students into the tank with you to remove your air."

"What?"

"You don't need it anymore, and soon it'll begin to damage your throat. Don't worry, there'll be people with you in case you need it again."

She tried to nod, forgetting for a second that she no longer could. "Okay."

She waited for a while until the doctor and two others returned. She felt splashes along the side of her body and soon saw two women swimming down to her. They were wearing respirators and full face masks.

"Are you ready?" one asked. Her breath hissed out into the water. She looked a pale green with faint whitish streaks along her chest.

"Yes." Kasana heard the metallic translation of her answer in the tank.

The one who had spoken slowly swam up to her. "Don't move. I'm going to hold you behind the gills as I remove the respirator. I won't do so until you say that you're ready. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

The woman swam up and wrapped her arm around Kasana's body. The touch felt odd, and somehow distant, as though being felt through thick clothing. The arm also felt almost uncomfortably hot.

"I'm in position. Are you ready?"

Kasana swallowed, trying to get rid of the dryness in the mouth. This was it. She took a deep breath, hopefully her last, and held it. She could feel herself begin to rise. "Yes."

Kasana saw the woman nod, and then she removed the respirator. The mask was gone and Kasana could feel water against her lips. She kept them closed, afraid to open them.

The woman noticed. "You need to start breathing. Don't worry, I'm

right here. Just open and close your mouth. That should open the gills. I have the respirator mask right here.”

Kasana tried again to nod. She had to do this. She had to. She tried to close her eyes, but no longer could. All she could do was stare. And she hadn’t even noticed when her eyelids went away. She opened her mouth and felt the water flow in. She felt a slight tearing behind her head. She closed her mouth and felt muscles clench and flesh flare wide behind her eyes. Then other muscles clenched. She opened her mouth again, and repeated the cycle.

She did it for a while, never feeling faint, and soon it became natural. She began to sink as her lungs, now just air bladders, slowly absorbed her last breath. “I’m fine. My gills are working.” She hummed and clicked and listened to the translation.

“They look fine. Call if there are any problems.” The woman let go and Kasana watched her swim back to the surface, to the air, now completely foreign to her.

FOR THE NEXT FEW WEEKS she luxuriated in her freedom from the respirator. Her waist was gone and she could easily move her tail. Her swimming remained awkward until her other fins finally popped out of their buds. They were still small, but they would grow. Her arms and legs continued to shrink, and soon they were only a little larger than the fins they would become. Her toes and fingers had thinned and were now joined by more ribs, all linked by a thin webbing. She could move them at her wrist and ankle, and widen and narrow their span, but she couldn’t bend her fingers anymore. Her body had narrowed to almost the right size. Physically she was almost complete. She watched the monitor less and less, as more and more of the images made no sense to her.

SHE WAS SLOWLY SWIMMING back and forth, half watching the monitor, when she noticed Dr Dalerul outside.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

She clicked and hummed her response. “Fine, considering.”

“Good. Your change is almost complete except for your head – your lungs have even merged into a single air bladder. Now, your brain has just started to shrink and the new neurons have begun to mature. You need to concentrate on language and memory.”

“I’ll try.”

“You’ll do more than try! You need to imprint what you want to

remember on your new neurons. You need to keep your speech and your knowledge. You'll probably lose literacy, but we hope nothing else. You may lose some of your older memories. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She turned away from him with a flick of her tail.

"You have to do this. If you don't your mind will be gone. I'm going to take the monitor away so you can concentrate. You have to do it."

She let out a loud hum and a sharp click. "Fine!" She understood what he meant though. She tried to remember. She remembered her past, or at least most of it. Some bits were gone. She didn't know what they were, but she knew things were missing. He was right, her mind was starting to go. But she wouldn't let it. She refused to let what she was die.

She started humming and clicking in the language she had created in another life. She hummed and clicked her history, and her parents; she hummed and clicked her past, and her plans for the future.

FOR THE NEXT MONTH her body and head continued to shrink. One day she heard a crack and found that she could open her mouth wider – she felt her eyes move upward slightly as her jaw distended. That meant something, something, she couldn't remember what, had happened.... Then she remembered vaguely – her skull had separated. She opened her mouth wide and gulped water. Soon she would be complete.

Then she went back to her sing-song history of hums and clicks. She would remember, she would not let herself forget.

TOWARDS THE END OF THE MONTH she began to feel curiously empty. She remembered something about this, a name, a word. She remembered hunger. She called for the ones who watched her. She remembered a name, vaguely, a Dalerul. He was a.... She couldn't remember. She called out in her clicking and humming way.

She saw motion outside her tank.

"Kasana? What's wrong? This is Dr Dalerul."

Doctor, that was it. Doctor, doctor, doctor....

"Kasana?"

Oh right. "I'm hungry, I think."

"Hungry?"

She watched as he checked something. She had no idea what it was. She waited and kept saying doctor to herself – she didn't want to forget it.

"Wonderful! Right on schedule." She heard the doctor speaking again.

“Your physical reduction is complete. You need food again. I’ll be back in a while.”

She watch him turn and swim away. Was swim the right word? She went back to her chant of memories. She wouldn’t let herself forget. She added “doctor”. A while later she noticed a number of doctors return. One swam to the top of her tank and there was a splash and a bunch of little ones swam down around her.

The doctor spoke, “Kasana. We’ve added fish to the tank. You need to start eating them.”

Eat? She remembered eating.... That’s it – she needed to swallow them. But why? She had never done so before. But she knew she had to listen to the doctors. She swam over to one and distended her jaw and swallowed it. It was good; it filled the hollowness inside her. Then she swallowed another one. So this was eating....

SHE HAD FED WELL AND WAS RESTING when the doctors came back. She heard them talking. They were saying something about preparing her from birth and conditioning, and something about her mind not being quite what they wanted for the rulers to escape what was coming, but she wasn’t sure what they meant. Eventually one of the doctors spoke directly to her.

“Kasana?”

She swam over to the edge of her world to look at him. “Yes,” she clicked and hummed back.

“The procedure is finally finished. You’re complete.”

Complete? That meant finished. Then she remembered – she had once been like them. They must mean that her new self was done. “I won’t change anymore?”

“It’s done and it’s successful. We’re going to release you.”

She was happy here. “Why?”

She heard the doctors whisper amongst themselves. She started chanting her memories while she waited. Finally a doctor spoke, “Don’t you remember? We’re going to release you into the oceans so you can create a new species. It’s why you accepted this change.”

She stopped and tried to remember. Oh, right. “I’m the first mother. It’s all finished then?”

“Yes. We’ll release you tomorrow. Then you’ll be visited once a month to check how you’re doing.”

A month? She dimly remembered it – something about days and time passing. In the last week it had become easier to remember, even though she had gaps, but she still chanted because it helped.

“Okay.” She turned and started swimming around looking for food. The small ones had become harder to catch.

THE NEXT DAY SHE WOKE UP from her half-asleep state and saw the doctors walk in. She swam over to the front of her world.

“We’re going to lower in a smaller tank. We need you to swim into it so we can take you to the ocean. Do you understand?”

Ocean? She remembered – it was where she was supposed to go. It was a much larger world. “Yes,” she hummed and clicked as she swam up towards the top of her world.

There was a splash and some bubbles and a large box was lowered in. It was only a little bigger than she was. She swam into it and carefully used her other fins to straighten herself out. It was really small. She heard a rattle and a thump beside her and looked – the entrance was closed in. She guessed it was time to go.

She watched the walls of her new world as it was lifted out into the... what? She thought and remembered the word. Air. She said it to herself a couple of times and added it to her chant of memory. She watched as her world was carried outside. Outside? But it was so bright. There was only a single light that she couldn’t look at. Ah, it was the sun. She started chanting sun to herself as she was loaded onto a truck and driven to the ocean. There a crane lifted her tank into another vehicle. There was a word for it. What was it? She tried but couldn’t remember.

“What are we going on?” she asked using her hums and clicks. But there was no translation, and nobody answered.

She just let herself float as she was lowered onto the vehicle. There was a bang, and some shouting, and then a few minutes of silence. Then there was a roar of something – a motor? – and then her world began to rock. She looked around and could tell that she was moving.

They traveled for a while but eventually stopped. She heard scraping from above and looked up. It looked like something was being moved. She thought it was the top of her world, but she wasn’t sure. Then she heard a doctor speaking to her.

“We’re going to tag you so we can keep track of you. There’ll be a moment of pain, but then you shouldn’t notice anything.”

They were doctors and so Kasana wasn’t worried. She just waited and

watched as some arms reached into her world. They were holding something metal. There was a sting in her first dorsal fin, and she flicked the fin and pulled herself to the bottom of the tank. She waited and the pain mostly went away, but she could still feel it if she tried. She was getting hungry. She realized that her first dorsal fin felt strange, like something was there. But she didn't worry – doctors would only do what was good for her.

"We're going to release you now. We'll keep monitoring you and we'll be back in a month."

"Yes," she hummed and clicked back.

She felt her world tip, and then saw the front being raised. Water roared out and she was swept along. She fell and splashed into colder, dirtier water. It tasted odd, but somehow right. She let herself sink and watched the boat. The roar started and it moved away.

She looked around her. This must be ocean, her new world. She was really hungry. She looked around for some food. There, in the distance, she saw one. She swam towards it. Boy, was this world large. She reached it and gulped it down. Strange, the food was easy to catch once she found it – the doctors had indeed taken her to a better place. She saw another small fish and dashed after it, and gulped it down too. It tasted different from the ones in her smaller world – in fact, it tasted better, and it filled her hollowness. She went off looking for more, slowly swimming deeper into the darkness since the light seemed too bright.

SHE WAS RETURNING TO THE OVERHANG she had adopted as home when she heard the rumble of another vehicle approaching. It must be the doctors! She was so lonely. There had been no one to talk to, only herself. But she had kept her memory chant. She swam out to greet the doctors.

It didn't take long until she reached a large, smooth, fish. It looked different from others she had seen, and had avoided, but she knew it was the doctors. It stopped as she approached. Then it spoke to her.

"We're glad to see you're still alive. Are you doing all right? Are you managing fine? Do you need anything?"

It took her a second but then she remembered the meaning of the words. Her memory was getting better. She hummed and clicked her answer. "I'm fine. My new world is wonderful. Thank you for bringing me here."

"You have enough food?"

"More than enough."

"Good. Then we'll see you next month. You should have laid your first eggs by then."

Eggs? She remembered they were very important. They were why she existed. They would become others like her. She hoped they could talk to her. She was so lonely when the doctors weren't around.

TIME PASSED IN ENDLESS BOREDOM. Sometimes it was light, and other times it was dark, but always there was no one to talk to. The smaller fish grew more wary of her just as she remembered to be wary of the occasional larger fish. She was glad that there weren't too many of them. As time passed she felt herself grow and start to become bloated. She knew it had to do something with her eggs.

Then one morning, while she was still in her half asleep state, she was jerked awake by new muscles. She felt a clenching behind her stomach, and a stretching by her anal fin. Then the muscles popped shut. She turned and saw a transparent bubble start to sink to the bottom of her crevice.

So, that was an egg.

She felt another clenching, and another stretch, and another pop. And another egg. And another. And another. Soon she lost count. Eventually, though, it ended. She felt like herself again, and the bloating she had felt was gone. She swam down and saw all of her many eggs sticking along the bottom.

Her eggs. She felt so proud of herself!

She didn't go very far to hunt after that and made sure to chase any other fish away. Fortunately none of the larger ones came. Unfortunately, the eggs wouldn't talk to her.

Eventually the doctors came again, and this time she waited for them. When she told them about her eggs, they were really happy. Their happiness made her feel good. Now if only she weren't so lonely....

EVENTUALLY HER EGGS HATCHED and she watched all the little ones swim around. She had a small urge to eat them as they looked like food, but she remembered that they weren't food. They were children. She wasn't forgetting things anymore. She stayed close and tried to keep her children happy. She tried talking to them, but they didn't answer.

When the doctors came, she was glad as she was lonely and missed the conversation, but they didn't stay long. So she stayed with her children. Gradually some began to talk, and she began to teach them. She kept the smart ones very close as she didn't want to be lonely any more.

A long time passed and she laid many eggs and had many young. Most couldn't talk, but some did. She made sure to keep the talking ones with her



and she taught them her chant of memories. She remembered something about the way they would breed, and that if an intelligent child mated with a dumb child, all of the children would be dumb. She tried to keep that from happening so that she would have more children to talk to.

The doctors kept coming, and she kept her smart children hidden from them. She remembered that they didn't want her to have smart children. But if they really didn't, then they wouldn't leave her alone. She didn't want to be lonely ever again.

She was very old, and had many smart children that stayed with her. Some of the dumb ones tried to stay, but she, her children, and her children's children always drove them away. She still had young, but had never needed a mate. She wondered why but remembered it was something the doctors had done for her. She added that to the memory chant she and her children shared between the stories they told each other.

One day the water felt odd. It felt quiet, like a calm before a storm, whatever a storm was. The children were worried and wanted to swim but weren't sure where. She led them out and they started to hunt, but it felt odd. There was no food. They started to swim deeper since it felt wrong to go to the surface. Some tried and said they would come back, but they never did.

She and her children were far deeper than they had ever gone before and the water was black. Then the water was lit up with a bright light, like they were at the surface. But then it passed. They saw some other fish and went to feed. They fed for a while and then the water was suddenly sucked away. They were pulled, and swirled, and tossed helplessly. Kasana tried to keep her children with her, but they had separated to feed. She could only keep close to a few.

Gradually the water settled and it was dark. Some of her children came back, but most were lost. They tried to find their way home but couldn't, but they found another home. But it was dark. They swam upwards and it stayed dark. They finally reached the right depth but it looked like night. It must be night.

They stayed, and the oceans stayed dark. That was wrong. They went to the surface and it was still dark. The world must have changed. They went back to their new home. Fish were scarce, and some of her children died. But others survived. They separated to hunt as individuals, coming back only to rest. When the sun came back years later, they kept hunting during the night. They were used to it and it was safe.

But as the years passed, the doctors never came back.

She would have been lonely but she had her smart children to talk to. She had her smart children, and her smart children's smart children. They all learned their chants of memory from her until finally she died.

AS THE CENTURIES, THE MILLENNIA, and the eons passed, the coelacanth survived. They hid in their caves during the day for safety where they talked and chanted the memories. At night, when it was safe, they hunted. The smartest married the smartest, but some were still born without the ability to remember. Those tended to be more brownish in colour and were driven out. The culture evolved and the eggs were laid in secret caves in the dark depths where the young remained hidden until they could join coelacanth society.

They survived the ice ages, they survived explosions and tidal waves, and so they survived until today, hidden and secret... except for the ones who can't learn the memories and are driven out to be caught in gill nets just before Christmas.

## A BEE OR NOT A BEE

“OBJECTION! WHAT RELEVANCE DOES THIS HAVE?” broke in Rachel Marth, defense attorney for the accused, Dr Dan Minlard.

Jason Randal, public prosecutor for the state of California, approached the judge. “Your honour, although the defendant does not deny his actions, he states that they were not murder. The court must see this video footage that proves that Dr Minlard’s actions were indeed murder. Cold and calculated.”

Rachel Marth continued, “But it’s just the video of the lab where the accused is claimed to have committed his crime. It’s already been shown.”

“True, you showed it earlier for your defense. Ms Marth. But, we have something to show in parallel to it that is vital for the state’s case.”

“And what is that?” asked the judge.

“Evidence that proves that who the defendant killed was actually the missing Dr Malcolm.”

The judge frowned for a second, thinking, until he was interrupted by Ms Marth.

“Who? Your honour—”

“Enough. Your objection is overruled – we will watch the video again. However, I reserve the right to restore the objection if the video’s relevance does not quickly become clear.”

Ms Marth frowned and turned away.

Jason smiled. “Thank you, your honour. The relevance will become clear almost immediately.” Then he turned and walked back to face the jury. “Just to refresh,” he began, “what you are about to see is a video that

shows the actual murder taking place. Although – you have seen it before, the right half of the screen will now show what was being typed into the workstation just before the cold-blooded murder took place. I apologize, as some of the information could not be recovered after the defendant deleted—”

“Objection! There is no proof that the defendant deleted any file.”

“The jury will ignore would they just heard. Would you please rephrase, Mr Randal?” asked the judge.

Jason turned to face the judge, “I apologize.” and then he turned back to the jury. “As I was saying, some of the information could not be recovered,” he turned to face Dr Minlard, “as someone deleted the file.” Jason smiled as he watched Dr Minlard frown.

Then the courtroom lights were darkened and the video recording was played for the jury. Like before, it showed a darkened computer lab dimly lit by the night lighting from the few overhead lights that always remained on. It started earlier than the video the defense had shown, but was clearly from the same tape. What could be seen in the corner was that one workstation was still on, and something was buzzing around the keyboard. But this was only the left half. The right half showed a close up of a workstation and something being typed.

Jason turned back to the jury. “I apologize, but the information you are seeing being typed was reconstructed from recovered information from the workstation in question. The typing has been synchronized with the video as best we could, based on analysis of what could be made out from the computer screen on the video tape.”

Then text slowly appeared on the right half of the screen, as it was typed onto the workstation – apparently by the bumble bee that could be seen buzzing up and down to press the appropriate keys:

“The experiment worked! It’s amazing – I’ve actually been compacted down and transformed into an insect. The colony even accepted me and somehow I understood the messages that they were sending to each other. I could walk in and mingle freely and without harm. The....”

The workstation display stopped scrolling for a few seconds as the message “CLUSTER OVERWRITTEN – INFORMATION COULD NOT BE RECOVERED” appeared. Shortly thereafter, the scrolling began again.

“...transformation. In fact it was almost completely pain free. We couldn’t believe it when the test animals showed no pain. I should have let someone know – I should have told someone that I was going to try it – but I’d always dreamed of this, I, Brian Malcolm. To be the first! To be....”

At this point the typing broke off as Dr Minlard entered the room,

switching the lights on. Once again the jury saw his astonishment as he saw the bee buzzing around the computer. Again they watched him stare at the computer screen for a second, and then roll up the newspaper that he was carrying and chase the bee for a few moments before he was finally able to swat it, dead. The video continued for a few minutes more, even though the defense had ended it at this point, as Dr Minlard sat down, stared at the workstation, and then closed the file. At this point, the video finally ended.

Jason smiled and whispered to himself, "And thus the prosecution proves its case."



## KEEPING SECRETS

DIMLY HE COULD HEAR THE INSECTS; dimly he could see the silver moon glittering through the trees; but all his attention was focused on the rabbit fleeing from him. He couldn't dash and catch it, so he had to wear it out. He had marked where its burrow was, so now all he had to do was to keep it away from the entrances. So far, he had succeeded. Enough time had passed so that the rabbit was tiring.

Just a few more moments, just a little closer....

He leapt and opened his jaws as far as any animal could, then he snapped them shut on the rabbit's head. Damn invaders.

There was a moment of resistance until the bones gave away. The rabbit didn't even have time to struggle.

He dropped the warm corpse and licked the blood from his lips and started wolfing down the meat. It was hot and salty, the droplets of blood that escaped his mouth peppering his striped fur and turning black and cold. Finally it was done.

He leaned back and howled his triumph.

Then he noticed someone hiding in the brush nearby, a human, female. He heard a snap of a lens and a whirr of film.

Good God, how much had she seen? He couldn't let her see any more. He turned and fled into the woods, his tiger stripes quickly blending in with the stripes of moonlight through the leaves.

Eventually he calmed and turned and made his way back to his camp, quickly loping on all fours. He reached his trailer and leapt into the mountain stream nearby. It was cold, very cold, especially the few drops that

slipped into his rudimentary pouch. He didn't stay long and soon bounded out onto the shore and violently shook the water out of his fur.

It was time to think.

He remembered being human and felt the change begin. Unlike American fiction, the change was not painful, and was very quick. There were no gradual sensations, just an orgasm of muscle and bone clenching and changing. The instant passed and his senses faded and he was back to human, still wet. He walked over to his trailer and pushed the door open, barely able to hear the creak of the hinges. There he grabbed a towel to finish drying himself, and finally sat down to think in the darkness.

He should have just killed her. It would have been quick and easy, but no, he had to panic. Now he would have to deal with her the hard way. He had to get her camera and her film and destroy it. His cousins in Europe had let themselves become too well known, and they were wiped out. Those who survived as what humans called Tasmanian tigers were glad that the humans thought them extinct – it gave them peace and quiet. But it was becoming harder and harder to keep their existence hidden.

This time it was his fault, so this woman was his problem. He would have to take care of her, like he had his other problems.

He lit the kerosene lantern and adjusted its light. Then he dug through his bags and dug out his uniform. He actually was one of the wardens with the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. He smiled at the irony; here he was, supposedly looking for the Tasmanian tiger, but instead working to keep its existence secret.

He grabbed a flashlight and went out and walked back through the wilderness to where he had eaten the rabbit. He looked around and recognized the brush she had hidden in. Unfortunately, she knew how to move in the wilderness. Shining his light over and around the brush revealed nothing. He sniffed and could still faintly scent her – she had been there. He would have to do it the hard way.

He shone the light around and made sure there was no one else in sight. Then he carefully removed his clothes and hid them under a rock. He hid the flashlight nearby. Then he turned and looked up into the moon – it had never been needed for him to change, but looking at it seemed to help. He concentrated on his wolf, on his stripes and pouch, on his jaws and mouth. He remembered the scent and the smell and the taste of the rabbit. Then the change started, his muscles ecstasied and he felt himself become the wolf.

In a second his senses opened and he drank in the night air. Now her



scent was clear, easy to follow. He crept through the brush and loped in the direction she had gone. There was something odd about her scent – probably some kind of insect repellent.

Her trail went down from the rugged highlands a short distance until it reached the dirt road that was the only way to get up into the wilderness preserve. He sniffed and smiled to himself – she had walked. She had to be close. He slunk back into the brush and followed the road in the direction she had gone. It wouldn't do to be seen by another car.

It wasn't long until the road branched off into a small campsite. He stayed in the brush and crept along it. Finally, some luck. All that was there was a single jeep and a single trailer. There were no other witnesses. The question now was how to get in. He crept into the clearing and circled around the trailer but there was only one door, and it was closed. He could smell her inside, alone. Except for that slight strangeness to her scent.... No time, it was almost dawn.

He turned and loped back to his clothes. He willed the change back to human and put them on. Then he changed back to wolf – he wanted his clothes ragged and torn. He rolled around in the dirt and the remnants of the rabbit to make sure his clothes were also dirty and bloody. Then he changed back. The actual change was such a wonderful experience that he often wished it would take longer, but not tonight. Then he was human again. He rolled around some more to make sure his skin was also bloodied and dirtied, then he ran back to her camper.

He reached it tired and gasping for air. Perfect. He banged on the door.

"Help!" There was no answer. So he banged and shouted louder.

Finally he stopped, for he could hear some sounds from inside. But they were strange sounds, a kind of shuffling and crackling. He called again: "Hello?" Finally, he could see the woman coming to the door, wrapped in a bathrobe.

She looked at him, wide awake.

"You have to help me! I was attacked by poachers. I have to call and report them so they don't escape." He let himself collapse against the door. He smiled to himself as she opened it. Fool!

The instant the door opened, he willed himself into the wolf. Ignoring the pleasure of the change, he leapt onto her and snapped his jaws and crushed her neck.

She didn't have time to scream.

He picked up the body and shook it. Then he dropped it and grabbed

it by a shoulder and crunched down, shaking it some more. Eventually the arm came off and it rolled across the floor. He stopped and licked at the blood.

No! He shook his head. Dawn was just beginning – he had to get the film. Then he would have to doctor the corpse some more to make it look like feral cats or something. He knew it would work. It had worked every other time he'd done this.

He willed himself back to human, the change this time a bit harder as the dawn light shone through the open door across the blood and gore. In his bare feet he walked over to her bed. He sniffed and followed her dim scent to the camera still in its case. He ripped the case open and grabbed the camera and banged it against the metal side of the bed. The case cracked and he banged it again. He wanted to make sure it looked damaged from her struggle. Finally the case shattered. He grabbed the film and pulled it all out of the roll to make sure it was well exposed to the dawn light. Later he would dump it in a stream just to make sure.

Almost done. Now to finish with the body.

He heard a low, rumbling growl behind him.

What? He spun around. The woman was slowly pulling herself from the floor. Her head had reattached itself to her torso but was still hanging loose, held only by strips of muscle. Her one arm was holding her other arm to her shoulder and he could see muscle and bone growing together.

He just stared.

The muscle and bone grew and the body healed. Then it began to change. The head lengthened and flattened, growing a bigger mouth with its own fangs. The ears slid up the head and grew out on top; her entire body began to be covered by black fur. Soon all he could see was a silhouette in the dawning sun, and the two glowing eyes. The odd scent he had noticed before grew stronger.

He staggered backward and fell onto the bed.

She laughed, a horrible, sickening, growling sound. He watched her neck thicken and widen; watched the muscle and tissue regenerate and heal.

"You can't kill me," she whispered. "I'm like you, just a different species." She opened her jaws and let out a low rumbling roar that made his legs shake.

He just stared, petrified in fear. Nothing had ever threatened him before. Especially nothing like this.

Her body stopped healing and stopped changing. She had become a glorious thing of human dreams, half woman, half panther. Other than

her upright stance, all that remained of her humanity was the black mane rippling down her back.

“That hurt. Really hurt. Now that you’ve seen me, I can’t let you live to tell anybody.”

“But...”

Step by step she moved towards him. She reached the tiny kitchen counter and pulled open a drawer. It scraped, wood against wood, loud in the dawn silence.

“Do you have any suggestions about how I can get rid of your body? It’s probably more than I can eat at one sitting.”

“I won’t tell, I won’t!”

“I know.”

She pulled the trigger and the gun fired, the bang loud over his whimpering.

The silver bullet made sure he kept his secrets forever.



*He said he wasn't satisfied with the central mystery. This story focuses on something deep in what was originally a simple, silly world.*

*Xanadu is a costume party gone wrong. It's one of the blank-slate settings that multiple writers have played with. Something strange happens, all kinds of story possibilities open up, and reading the original tale qualifies you to write your own. That's why this one has references to other people's work in it, including commercial fiction characters. But all of those are only a backdrop for this character's personal problem.*

*The hero isn't just transformed. His deepest wish has been granted, but in a way that puts a huge burden on him. And he remembers something... the beginning of another life. This part of the story was something Bard struggled to get just right. It's a scene that pushes the boundaries of what humans can imagine and describe. That kind of writing is one of the best things about science fiction, and the anthropomorphic fiction Bard loved.*

*"Five Hours" isn't Bard's only foray into the Xanadu setting. He also handled legends and the birth of magic in "Now I Will Believe There Are Unicorns".*

*~ Kris Schnee*

## XANADU: FIVE HOURS, THIRTY-TWO MINUTES

THE DOCTORS NEVER WANTED ME to go to Xanadu; they thought it was too much of a risk. I insisted. Yes, I expected to die sooner rather than later, but Xanadu was my one escape, my one dream out in the real world.

Living in a bubble, sealed off from everything, makes one shy, afraid. Getting out wasn't hard – places like NASA were more than happy to donate spacesuits and life support equipment, and even modify it for me. It made good PR.

But it was the stares, the crowds of people jostling me, poking at me.

Pitying me. Yes, pity.

It's why I told so few the truth. Told so few that I was one of the oldest living sufferers of Severe Combined Immune Deficiency. SCIDS, better known as the Boy in the Bubble disease. I hadn't been diagnosed right away. Only after an infection at four months, that ultimately resulted in my losing both my legs, did they diagnose me as having no immune system at all. My mother's had kept me going for the first few months of my life,

even though she'd died giving birth to me, but when my own was supposed to kick in, it hadn't.

And so I was isolated. Sealed. Touched only through rubber. Seeing the world only on the screen and through the window.

It gives one a lot of time to read.

All my short life I'd dreamed of technology, dreamed of a cure. The most common one was bone marrow transplant, but they couldn't find a match for me. There were rumours of gene therapy to replace the defective gene, but nothing usable. Yet.

Xanadu had always had a large costuming or fursuiting group. And, I had to go in costume anyway – the full spacesuit that NASA donated, modified to have the lower half replaced by a wheeled chair. Of course, it was no fun to go as a human in a space suit – that was missing the whole spirit of the thing! Not to mention reminding people of my disease.

Obviously, I had to go as an alien in an environment suit visiting Earth.

It was actually easy. A mirrored visor, and a lot of imagination and bald faced lies about what the visor hid. It was fun! And by the third year the alien had gotten pretty elaborate.

But then, I didn't have much else to do with my life. And, the more elaborate the costume, the more impressed people were, and the less likely they were to pity me.

This year, like so many previous, I'd driven my little self-contained world around the con, chatting with people I knew, acting all dark and mysterious and confused by all the strange things these Earthlings did, and generally having a good time interacting as best I could.

Interacting with a world I could never touch.

So many people in costumes that hid themselves from the world, a world that they could feel—

By the time the Event happened, I'd had to park in a corner and just watch, my entire body aching with the wish, the need, to have what they'd all hidden in their costumes. I couldn't even wipe the tears from my eyes as the cool sterile air hissed in so that I could breathe. A quick check revealed that there were five hours and thirty two minutes of oxygen left.

It was just as Mr Winters was striding up to the stage to hand out the first prize to the winners that I lost it completely. Wheels whirring I turned away and threw myself into my dreams of what I wanted the suit to be. An alien, weird, inhuman, breathing a frightening cold liquid medium. Here by choice to visit, with a whole world to return to. With a companion so that they were never *ever* alone.

I felt a bit faint, maybe the breathing mixture. I just pushed the thought aside, trusting the technology. Closing my eyes I could almost feel that this suit, this environmental capsule was just temporary—

—I BLINKED AN EYE OPEN, feeling stronger and more secure. A tentacle caressed controls and status updates pulsed into my mind. Everything nominal, environment safe, breathing mixture optimal.

<Of course.>

<Who's there?> Grabbing control of more eyestalks, I twisted them around, oozing through the liquid. Trying to see who'd spoken.

<I'm you, of course.>

I focused on the second neural cluster, my sophantsibling.

Our gills pulsed, liquid sucked through them, and the environmental unit clicked as hydrogen enriched ammonia gurgled into the environmental medium.

<I think we'd better call for pickup.>

Pictures poured from his neural cluster down our shared link into mine and I saw a scene of chaos and horror as animals and aliens and all sorts of weirdness ran and panicked in the hall. Inside my cocoon there was only silence.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be real.

Idly I re-arranged biological connections and took control of an auditory sensor and listened to the dim vibrations of human screams and sobs and growls distorted through the liquid medium I now floated in with my sophantsibling.

<The ship isn't answering. I hope it's just a momentary failure.> I felt liquid gurgle over our shared gills as he sucked nervously.

I knew it wasn't and let my fear and panic and knowledge flow down into my sibling. I checked the life support systems.

Five hours, thirty-two minutes of hydrogen remaining.

Five hours, thirty-two minutes of life remaining.

My sibling screamed across our shared nervous system. <Who are you? Who are you?>

That hurt! But how could it hurt when I wasn't hearing him with ears?

<This can't be true! I'm not your imagination!>

I took control of some of our tentacles and ran them along his primary neural cord. I could feel a slight buzz as he sucked ammonia through our gills far more rapidly than he really should have. With a click more hydrogen filled ammonia gurgled in and our life span grew shorter.

<I am not!>

<Nasalla, please don't panic.> The name I had imagined my other self, my sophantsibling, to have.

<Why shouldn't I?>

<Please.... I've been alone for so long. I don't want to die alone.> Die. I was really going to die. Just what the doctors had been warning me about for years. Gently I squeezed his neural cluster.

<You're not Allasan. Where is he? *Where is he?*>

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla, just shut up and listen! Please!>

<Why?>

<Maybe one of us is mad. I *knew* it wasn't me. But only five hours— Right now we can't tell if either of us even are, let alone who it is. Can you recall any case of either half of an undamaged sibling pair going insane?>

<No—>

<Let's activate the emergency beacon. If I'm the insane one, and I hope to God that I am, then that'll get us picked up and we'll live.>

<But if I'm the insane one, we have just... five hours, eighteen minutes left.>

Click. Gurgle.

<That's possible. And, if it is, do you want to try and live, or die screaming?>

<Point. I'm— Allasan, I'm sorry. It's just.... It's just that I've never been alone before.>

<That's all right. I've been alone enough for both of us. But we're together now.>

<Yes. We're together – sophantsibling.>

Together we activated the emergency beacon.

I looked outside and saw that the room was quieter now. Just a few figures sobbing on the floor. Some piles of shattered rock – I wonder what they'd been. Then I saw a statue of a snake-headed woman holding a thin slab of rock, highly polished and reflective – a mirror? – and I shuddered.

<Are you all right?> Nasalla asked.

Click. Gurgle.

<I'm starting to fear that you're the mad one.>

<I hope not. Five hours, fourteen minutes. Why, though?>

I shied away from the shattered remains of former humans. <Nasalla, why do you use hours and minutes?>

<Why wouldn't I? It's the standard unit.>

<But it's what I remember as the Solarian unit of time.>



<Hmm – It is possible that your madness could be taking the Lalannas units and thinking they're Solarian.>

I played around with the thought, and couldn't see any logical flaw. <Do you see those piles of rocks outside? And the statues scattered amongst them?>

Yes—

Click. Gurgle.

<I think they were Solarians once. They seemed to have undergone a molecular reconstruction from biological to silicon base. I think it— I think it killed them.>

<You're sure some of the screaming primitives didn't just knock over some of the statues and break them?>

<Nasalla, do you remember those statues being there before... before I went mad?> I could feel his nervousness ping along the neural links we shared. Along with my nervousness.

<No.>

Click. Gurgle.

<What do you remember?> I could feel our gills suck angrily as Nasalla took control of them.

<Nothing much before we merged. Of course I remember the merger clearly, the blossoming of intelligence. Then we were trained, joined expedition after expedition, and finally this one. Jumped here to explore contact for trade.> He opened his memories to me and I opened a link and started browsing with part of my mind.

<Do you remember faces, names, people, friends?>

<Of course I do! Clearly. Most recently Captain Maksanaskam. The briefing. Tentacles entwining, sharing information, knowledge—>

<I've never touched anybody.>

Click. Gurgle.

<I'm... sorry, Allasan. How can you have lived like that? All alone?>

I took control of our gills and gulped some ammonia to try and calm myself. <I— I had no choice.>

<From your memories, a simple retrovirus to repair the damaged gene would have sufficed.>

<On this primitive place?>

He chuckled, his humour bouncing along our shared nerves. <Point.>

<Masalla, I remember creating us, this race, bits of the culture. I— I created it because I wanted to be something that was never alone. Ever.>

<We've been alone; we are alone, in this suit.>

Click. Gurgle.

I rummaged through our shared memories. It was easier now, and they did seem complete. So much contact— <Nasalla, you’ve never been alone. Never cried yourself to sleep on a sterile mat. Never pressed your hand against a rubber glove, feeling that something is inside, but never *feeling* it.>

I felt Nasalla rummaging through my memories. For a second we stopped swallowing. <Allasan, that’s horrible, an abomination! Alone in your mind— There’re dark rumours of sophantsiblings where one half died....> He shuddered.

<You know, Nasalla, I was only twelve Solarian years old. Now I have such a rich... heritage... from you. Decades and decades of existence. All that knowledge—>

<There are gaps. Things that you stored are gone. You were always the artist of us, the romantic.>

<Given that I created us, that’s no surprise!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Don’t even think that, Allasan!>

<Nothing from the ship yet, you know.>

<No—>

There was a knocking on our environmental unit and I grabbed control of some eyestalks and focused them on the likely source of the sound. I could feel Nasalla doing likewise. There was a Solarian looking at us, leaning down and looking through the transparent dome on top. He was dressed all in black, and wearing dark glasses. There was a mono-tonal babble that dragged on and on, and then I heard: “Ambassador Kikicluthk, I need you to come this way for your safety. The security of this conference has been compromised.”

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, what’s he talking about?>

I focused on the Solarian. It couldn’t be! They were fiction! <Nasalla,> I asked slowly, <have you ever heard of a group called ‘Men in Black’ or ‘MIBs’?>

<I think I remember something in the cultural studies – Yeah, a movie a few years back. Some crap about aliens on Terra and a group keeping it secret.>

<That’s what I remember too. I don’t think our visitor is fictional, though.> I moved an eyestalk around to get a better look at him and saw that he was carrying a gleaming chrome weapon stuck in his pocket. <Maybe we better do what he says.>

<Listen to a stupid Solarian?> He paused and then thought at me. <Sorry. No offense meant.>

Click. Gurgle.

<None taken, sophantsibling. It looks like he's carrying a weapon, and the last thing we need is for somebody to shoot us.>

<But Terra doesn't have the kind of portable tech that could hurt us!>

<And if I'm right and both of us were changed, created?> I waved a tentacle around inside our Environment Unit. <And the tech keeping us alive?>

<Point.>

<Besides, if he's gathering up the aliens, we might find somebody who can help us with our hydrogen problem.>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

I rummaged through our shared memories and activated the external speaker. "We will follow. Please be aware that we need liquid hydrogen for our breathing medium as soon as possible." It never hurts to ask. I listened, heard the echoes of the English I was speaking, a few echoing tinkles, and then a dull monotonous monotone. <Nasalla, we're speaking English, aren't we?>

<Now why would we be doing that? It's all in the translation matrix. Don't you remember the ship hiding in orbit for two months gathering the data, and our building the matrix?>

<Umm—>

<Oh. Trust me, we did.> He fed me the specific memory, I hadn't had a chance to look at it, and I had to agree. Unless the memory was fake.

I felt Nasalla switch off some controls. <Listen, sophantsibling.>

The MIB spoke again and then walked off, but all I heard was a dull monotonous drone that made no sense what so ever. <I'm not speaking English, am I?>

<You got it Allasan.>

Click. Gurgle.

I started manipulating the Environment Unit controls and drove after him, a soft hum echoing through our breathing medium. <Would you mind switching the translation matrix back on?>

<Certainly. After one thing.>

<Oh. Point.>

Nasalla switched the translation matrix back on. <By the way Allasan, Five hours, three minutes.>

<Oh.>

Click. Gurgle.

I drove after the Man in Black, the only sensation of movement being a slight tendency for our body to press against the back of the Environment Unit. My sophantsibling and I just looked out at the ruins of the con. There were no more shattered remnants of bodies – no bodies at all, thank God, – but the wreckage of stands and displays were everywhere. Some of the walls showed scars and craters from what looked like energy weapon fire, and we saw one person, apparently a Pierson's Puppeteer, curled up in the corner shivering. Guess he wasn't insane enough. I think I saw a person being sucked into a ball, but it happened so fast I couldn't be sure.

<Nasalla? Is this thing armed? I don't remember any weapons—>

<Armed? That would be so individual! Besides, nothing on this world other than anti-tank rounds could hurt it. Or so the scans showed.>

<Crap.>

<Crap.>

Click. Gurgle.

We joined a group of aliens – mostly from Star Trek. A Romulan, a pair of Vulcans, and a Centauri and Narn in opposite corners glaring at each other.

<This may not have been the best of ideas, Nasalla.>

<I don't have anything better. And we do have some time yet.>

<I checked. Four hours, fifty-two minutes.>

<Oh. Seems so little.>

The elevator doors closed and we started upward. <You know, Nasalla, this is kind of ironic.>

<It is? I thought it was just depressing.>

<Assume my memories are right. In that case I went from living in a bubble with unlimited air, to living in a bubble,> I motioned around with some tentacles, <with limited air.>

Nasalla chuckled, ammonia gurgling through our shared gills. Then he was suddenly serious. <You're not alone, though.>

I blinked one of our eyestalks and ran a tentacle gently along Nasalla's prime neural cluster, feeling the touch like it was against somebody else's warm, soft flesh. Only a soft echo of the touch made it into my primary neural cluster. <And that makes it all worthwhile.>

<I'm glad we're together.>

<Same.>

Click. Gurgle.

I THINK NASALLA WAS HUMOURING ME as I followed the MIBs into a conference room full of milling aliens. He knew that the mothership would pick us up. I had my doubts. Even though I doubted he was right, I hoped he was. I *really* hoped he was.

Virtually all of the aliens were from either Star Trek, or Babylon 5. And that meant that they were all oxygen breathers, which meant that we were screwed. I checked, dutifully driving around with encouragement from Nasalla, and asking with increasing desperation only to find out that there was no hope. Sure, there were weapons. Lots and lots of fancy SF weapons, but nothing else. Didn't anybody believe in *peaceful* aliens?

A part of my mind took control of some of our tentacles and waved them around in anger. Another part of me gulped more hydrogen rich ammonia through our gills.

The questioning took a long time as I'd say something, and then wait until it was translated. Then they'd say something, I'd wait, and it'd be translated.

Click. Gurgle.

"...VULCAN SCIENCE DIRECTORATE has determined that sentient entities which breathe mediums other than gaseous oxygen do not exist. Therefore, any such research has not been conducted as it would not be logical. Just as your existence is not logical. Unless you're lying—" the Vulcan droned on but I'd stopped listening.

<You know Allasan, I'm not familiar with any of these entities here. You sure they're not just Solarians in disguise?>

<Check the scanners Nasalla – too many outward differences and consistent thermal readouts.>

<I thought we knew all the aliens in this region of the galaxy.>

<Unless I'm right and you're wrong.>

<Point.>

<And nothing from the ship yet? It's been almost two hours.>

<That doesn't make sense! We were supposed to be picked up an hour ago, and they should have grabbed us then, even if they somehow missed our beacon.>

<Have we made formal contact with the Solarians yet?>

<Of course not! We're still gathering information – we're the communication specialists. It's a gift. The captain put us here in a pretend costume so that we could get more data at close range and further refine the translation matrix. Could something have happened...?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Something so rapid that they wouldn't have sent us at least a warning? Nasalla, isn't there some kind of survival equipment to process dihydrogen monoxide for breathing?>

<There is—>

<Why don't we have it? It can't be that bulky!>

<There was some fear that it might be damaged – or that some Solarians might dump other fluids down it—>

<Oh, come on!>

<Point.>

Both of us gasped desperately through our shared gills. I knew the truth, and Nasalla was coming to agree with me.

Click. Gurgle.

<Three hours, eight minutes,> I sent down through our shared nervous system.

<We've got to get out of here and find somebody who can help us.> Nasalla took the controls and drove us roughly through the crowd to the door where an MIB was standing. "Get out of my way."

"Ambassador Kikicluthk, it's not safe for you to leave!"

"We have urgent—" Nasalla continued.

"It's too dangerous, you have to remain here!"

"We need hydrogen!"

"Zed has some on its way. According to the Tycho Accord—"

<This isn't getting us anywhere, Nasalla.> I took control of a tentacle and switched on one of the headlights so that it spot lit the MIB's crotch. The Environment Unit was a bit on the short side.

Click. Gurgle.

<What are you doing, Allasan?>

"Sir. I have armed this suit's Photonic Wave Motion Disruptor. If you do not get out of our way in fifteen seconds, I *will* use it."

<We don't have any weapons, Allasan! That'd be too individual!>

<Nasalla, he doesn't know that.>

There was a moment of silence. <Point.>

I checked the timer. "Ten seconds."

"Ambassador Kikicluthk, you place me in an awkward situation. Are you calling a Code White under the accord?"

Code White? What was a Code White? Who cared? "Yes. Five seconds."

"Your timing's a bit off, Ambassador," the MIB stated. But, as you have

a Code White, you may depart. Is there a way I can reach you when your hydrogen comes?”

Ignoring him, Nasalla drove us out and down the hallway. <Any ideas, Allasan?>

<Got me. Try going back to the main conference area. Maybe we can find somebody still there. Or somebody who might know.>

Click. Gurgle.

<By the Duality, I hope so!>

<We just passed the elevator.>

<Oops.>

I let Nasalla drive us back and pushed the down button as we waited.

<You’d think they’d have a faster means of vertical movement in this primitive place. Swimming is so much easier!>

<We have to make do, Nasalla.>

<Two hours, fifty-seven minutes.>

<You don’t think there’s a ship anymore, do you?>

<There has to be!>

<Then why the panic?>

<Because if there is no ship, then my entire race, all my friends, are gone, and have never existed.>

Click. Gurgle.

I ran a tentacle gently along his primary neural cord, glorying in the touch, even though it felt almost like I was just touching myself. <Don’t worry, we’ll survive. The ship will find us, or we’ll find a way.>

<How do you know that?>

The elevator dinged open and I took control of the tentacles on the movement controls and drove us in. <I don’t. But I have to believe it.>

<Unless the ship—>

<You want to depend on that?>

<Point.>

The elevator door thunked shut behind us and I spun around an eyestalk and pushed the button for the ground floor. Slowly the elevator started descending. <Nasalla, we can’t panic. At least not for another three hours. *Then* we can panic.>

He snickered, chuckles bouncing along our shared neural system. <I just hope we’re still around then.>

Click. Gurgle.

<I double checked the beacon, and the radio. Both passed full diagnostics. The ship *has* to be able to hear us.>

<Nasalla! Believe that, fine, but don't panic. Don't let that stop us from looking for other sources.>

The elevator stopped on the second floor and the doors slid open revealing a startled anthropomorphic rabbit, pure white with glistening blue eyes, blinking in the light we were projecting. I turned it off. "Sorry." I almost said *Exterminate!* But the Environment Unit didn't look quite right though.

Nasalla pushed the button and the doors thunked shut before I could hear the rabbit's reply. <Why did you waste hydrogen apologizing?>

<Because it was the right thing to do.>

<The right thing to do is to be picked up—>

<That isn't happening—>

<*I know that!*>

The elevator dinged and the door slid open on the ground floor.

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla! Just shut up! We'll find something!> I started driving us out. It's hard to stay calm when your sophantsibling's anger pulses up and down and through your shared neural network.

<On this primitive place?>

A dull monotone droned outside, and then it was translated: "Exudes mean MIB look informed? Do yew no what floor...?"

What the— <Nasalla, is something wrong with the translator?>

He ran a quick diagnostic. <No—one of the tasks we came here for was to work on cleaning up how it dealt with accents.>

<Accents. Probably a phonal analysis breakdown.>

Together we connected our neural system to the onboard translation matrix allowing direct mental manipulation of the structure. It didn't take long for us to call up individual sounds that were picked up, map them against stored phonal groups with probabilities, scan the speech for distinctive accent markers and flag them, and create a tentative sub-matrix adapted to the particular accent in question. Generally I was the one who determined which phonemes, or discrete language sounds, were correct, which were distortions, and which were accent markers, and Nasalla was the one who manipulated the actual matrix.

A dull knocking echoed through our breathing fluid.

Nasalla and I looked at each other through different eyestalks, and then ran the recorded speech through the improved matrix.

"Excuse mean MIB looking formed. Do you no what floor—?"

My best guess was that he was looking for the MIBs who'd sent for him. Answering, I let the default non-accented matrix create our response: "Up on the eighth floor. A.C. Clarke room." I examined the Solarian as the



system processed our response. He was wearing a red Star Fleet shirt and carrying some kind of thick plastic case.

“Trench.” He pushed by and into the elevator as we drove out. “Tan doors— You’d think theta invented transcendental aluminum be now.” The doors thumped shut behind us.

It took only another few moments to further manipulate the matrix and refine the sub-algorithm we’d started on with the additional recorded input.

Click. Gurgle.

What was I doing? Sub-algorithms? Translation matrixes? Phonal groups? Probabilities? <Nasalla? What just happened?>

<He had a fairly thick accent – I think he was from a place called Scotland.>

<Nasalla. I don’t *know* anything about language translation!> I gulped ammonia as more thoughts burbled through my brain. <In fact, I’m only twelve years old. So, how come I think and speak like an adult, am not panicking, and know how to use and program an alien language translation matrix?>

<Twelve years – *individual!*> Nasalla sighed through our shared gills. <Allasan, whomever, for a second it *was* Allasan back. My sophantsibling. My other self.>

<But—>

<I see two possibilities. Either the insanity that created your delusions about once being a Solarian is breaking down, or there are pieces of what you imagined Allasan to be, the skillsets that Allasan had, still present within your neural cluster.>

I thought on that for a moment, slowly sucking ammonia through our gills as I played around with the idea. <I *know* that this whole entity, our whole race—> I motioned around inside the Environment Unit with a pair of tentacles— <was created out of my imagination.>

<I’m starting to believe you... though I wish I didn’t.>

It seemed that as part of whatever transformed us, me, a significant part of Allasan’s skill set and abilities had been transferred over to me. Along with, I guess, his maturity. The whole concept of childhood, something I’d remembered intellectually as existing within inside the bubble, was now gone. I could imagine it as a logical exercise, but I couldn’t *believe* it, couldn’t feel it—

<What’s wrong, Allasan?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla— Nasalla, to Solarians childhood is a thing to be treasured.

Or at least so I remember. And now, I can remember events when I was a Solarian child, but I can't *feel* them. I can't *know* them other than as intellectual concepts.>

Nasalla was quiet for a moment, the only sound the gurgle of ammonia through our gills. <Allasan, I don't know what's going on. But, remember that we Lalannas don't have a childhood, or not really. In our youth we live as non-sophants. We merge, we gain sentience, and almost the first thing we do is encounter an adult who links with us and fills our minds with knowledge. Other sophant species we've encountered have childhood. We don't.>

I felt like my lips were quivering. <Nasalla, I don't think I was meant to grow up so fast. So... abruptly. To lose.... I'm not ready for this!>

I felt a tentacle run itself along my primal neural cord. <Allasan! You said it yourself, we *can't* panic!>

<I— I know. But it's so damn hard!>

<You have to try. We both have to try. It's our only hope. Except for the ship of course.>

<There is no—>

<Then act like an adult, not like an individual!>

I slowly decreased the speed I was sucking ammonia past our shared gills, slowly calming as Nasalla ran a tentacle up and down my primal neural cord. Finally I asked, <Nasalla, how... how are you coping? Is it easier for adults?>

<Easier? I *wish* it was!> He took control of our gills and rapidly gulped down some ammonia. <Allasan, if you look at the memories I passed you, you'll see that we've... that myself and the real – bad word – the *original* Allasan, have been in bad spots before. Admittedly this one is at the top of the list. If you're right then I just remember experiencing those events, but then that's really the same thing. Sure, I have some training, some practice, but I just try and ignore it and concentrate on the task. It's not maturity or any such thing. It's just... it's just a matter of not letting it control you. I wish I had more to offer.>

He released the gills to me and I concentrated on slowly gulping ammonia past them to calm down. <Thank you, Nasalla. I'm sorry.>

<Allasan, it's past. Right now we have to survive. Later, we can reason it out. There is no destiny, no master controlling entity as the Solarians have. There is the Duality, but that is where our collected experiences, what makes us conscious sophants, merge with those who have gone before us to imagine into existence a new reality when enough wisdom has been gained.>

<But—>

<Allasan.... You've shown me your memories, and I have the same lack of understanding. Like you I remember learning to speak, to identify objects, but it's not *real*. It's just too foreign, too individual—>

<Nasalla.... Am I mad?>

A tentacle reached up and gently ran along my primary neural cord.  
<Allasan, you're no more mad than I am. One of us has a delusion, nothing more—>

Click. Gurgle.

<We better get going, Nasalla. I read... two hours, thirty-five minutes.>

<Point. Where's the individual ship?>

<I don't know. But—> I took control of another tentacle and ran it along Nasalla's primary neural cord. <Thanks. I—>

<Don't worry about it, sophantsibling. I panicked, you panicked, now we're even. Let's see what we can find!>

THE FIRST PLACE WE WENT TO WAS the front desk – they might have some ideas. There was a nervous looking clerk there, along with a pair of Jedi – Ben Kenobi and Luke Skywalker apparently – performing a practice duel with lightsabres.

<What are those weapons? Glass?> Nasalla asked. <But readings say they're lasers. That's not possible—>

<I think almost anything is possible now.>

Just in case, I asked them if they had a solution to our problem. Sadly, though their duel looked impressive, and they could do all kinds of impossible things, it seemed that The Force couldn't produce liquid hydrogen.

We drove outside to talk to the police – and there were *lots* of police. Politely they stopped us, thinking we were about to leave. I stated our problem, and we were passed from one officer to another, to another, until finally one answered that they'd "work on it".

Nasalla and I had our doubts.

We thought about making a run for it but decided not to for a number of reasons. There were SWAT teams in evidence, and they could have mounted weapons that could damage our Environment Unit. If the ship did exist and had lost our beacon, then they'd go to the conference centre. We needed to stay there. More importantly though, we had no idea where to go to get help.

So we drove back through the convention. Most of the rooms were shambles – oddly, nothing much seemed to be looted though there was no way to be sure. There weren't many people around. A few superheroes

– who would be highly useful if we needed somebody to break through a wall or bend an iron bar – seemed to be standing around keeping an eye on things. Eventually we made our way to the cafeteria, hoping to find somebody useful there.

<Nasalla, this is probably a stupid question – especially given our situation – but, what do we eat?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Funny you should ask. We're filter feeders. We need them to be healthy. The breathing medium around us is full of single celled organisms consuming our waste potassium and producing hydrogen—>

Hope flashed through me. <Then why are we running out?>

<There's not enough. Just enough so that we feel okay, not enough to noticeably affect our environment.>

<And when are they all used up?>

<Hmm,> Nasalla checked, <that's not for another four days or so.>

<Great—>

Click. Gurgle.

<Doesn't really matter in the long run if we're trapped here. We can eat some Solarian foods – just grind them up and drop them in. Why do you think we were trying to make contact to trade? For the tech around here? Of course we also wanted the standards like art, stories, movies—>

<Point.>

We looked around. Four or five anthropomorphic animals – mostly vulpines – and a group of three Solarians with minor animal features: elephant trunk, rabbit ears, cat ears.

<Allasan – maybe that one.> He passed control of an eyestalk to me and I saw a woman sitting at a dark table – its only light was a thick candle as the overhead fluorescents all around her weren't working. A bowl was floating in front of her, and then it glowed, and melted upward into a cup.

<No, I don't know how either,> I answered, <but I can't see anyone else that could possibly help us.>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

I drove us over to her table.

"Excuse me, Miss?" I asked.

She jerked in astonishment and the cup flowed back into a bowl, and then clanked onto the table, rattling to a standstill.

"Excuse me?" she echoed. "I was— Do you need help opening that thing?"

"No!" Nasalla and I both screamed through the translation matrix together.

She cocked her head and looked at us. I pumped ammonia through our gills faster and felt like I was blushing.

<I'd better talk – I'm the Solarian here, remember?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. But this Environment Unit is necessary for our continued life – oxygen is poison to us."

"You're not human?"

"No. Miss. Something from my... ahh... imagination."

Nasalla good naturedly hissed at me.

"Umm—" I continued, "We, I, couldn't help but, uh, notice—"

"The lights?" she asked smiling.

"Well— Uhh, no, but—"

<Allasan, what's wrong with you? You're acting like we're about to intertwine ourselves with a mate—>

<I don't—>

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, you're not human anymore. If you tried, she'd either freeze in our negative-one-hundred-degree environment, or we'd boil in hers.>

<Well— True, but—>

"I'm allergic—" she began.

<Can't you *see*?> Nasalla moved a tentacle and switched on the light I'd used on the MIB.

"No!" she screamed, and I would have winced had not the electronics dampened the translated sound down to something bearable.

<What did you do, Nasalla?>

<Just the lights – thought I'd let you take a look at her and see that it'd never work.>

<You could have—>

"I'm not sneezing!" she said in her dull monotonous voice which was then translated.

I blinked an eyestalk and looked at her.

Click. Gurgle.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'm...." She looked embarrassed. "Allergic to fluorescent lights."

I burst out laughing and the matrix dutifully translated it.

Her face turned reddish and she glared at me.

"I'm— I'm sorry. It's just.... The idea of being allergic to fluorescent lights – it's just so... so absurd!"

"You wouldn't say that if you were."

"Point."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I was just, ahh... agreeing with you."

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, it won't work. You're not the same species! Now get control of yourself.>

<Yes, but—>

<Actually, Allasan – according to the onboard systems she's projecting some kind of low-frequency energy—>

<What?>

<Let me just—> He manipulated some of the onboard systems and the transparent dome capping the Environment Unit darkened, paled, and darkened a little. <Got it!>

<Got what?>

<I've made the dome opaque to that particular frequency.>

<Oh.> I blinked the eyestalk I was using and looked at her. She was – different. Before she had glowed, and the rest of the world had faded into shadow around her. But now, now she was beautiful, beautiful as Solarians would think, but just – normally beautiful. Blinking, I grabbed another eyestalk and focused on her. In fact, it seemed that her body, well, the white silk draped shapely version, the long golden hair, the long translucent fluorescent wings, were all partially transparent. Or they wavered. I could see perched on the back of the chair a much smaller beautiful woman. The tiny figure was dressed, and looked largely the same, but appeared more normally beautiful, rather than superhumanly beautiful.

"Hello in there?"

"Oh. Sorry." I found that I could speak easily now without confusion.

Click. Gurgle.

<Don't tell her about me. I don't know what was affecting you, but there's no sense in letting her know you have a sophantsibling.>

"Anyway, I'm Allasan— Well, I am now, anyway—"

She giggled politely.

"—and I couldn't help but see your...." I motioned towards the table where the bowl had finally stopped spinning with one of the Environment Unit's manipulator tentacles. "Magic. I guess that's what it is, anyway."

<It could be psychic powers. I've heard rumours—>

<Be quiet, Nasalla!>

"Oh, that. I was practicing. I guess that now I am Elisandra Melisande Blueleaf the Eighth, Princess of the Willowand Faeries. And it seems that I can now do magic—"

<Told you, Nasalla!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Hmph! Magic is simply physics we don't understand yet.>

"Pleased to meet you, Princess."

"And you, Allasan."

"Anyway, I couldn't help but see what you were doing, and came over to... well, ask for your help."

"Oh?" The translucent form blinked whilst the smaller form obscured within leaned forward a bit.

"Well— Remember I said that oxygen is poison for me?"

She nodded.

"I... I have only—"

Click. Gurgle.

<Fifty-eight minutes, Allasan>

"—a little under an hour before I run out of hydrogen."

"Run out?"

"As you breathe oxygen, I breathe hydrogen."

She nodded, and her wings moved slowly down and then back up.

"Anyway, we— I desperately need more liquid hydrogen or, well, I'm dead."

Click. Gurgle.

"Oh! That's—"

"Tell me about it. I've tried everything else, I was just hoping that maybe magic—"

"Could solve the problem! Well, I'm still kind of new at this—"

<Great Duality....> Nasalla muttered.

"Oh. Well, we.... I'm getting kinda desperate here."

She pulled a massive gold and silver-bound tome out from a too-small pouch on the diminutive form partially hidden inside, and thumped it open on the table. I could dimly see ornate writing inside that writhed and reshaped itself as I watched.

<Careful there, Allasan – that writing is radiating a low energy too. It's in the same frequency range as whatever it was she was putting out, so we should be fine.>

She leafed through the pages muttering something under her breath.

It was easy to tell it wasn't English from her lip movements – oddly, the movements of both the translucent form, and the small form inside, were synchronized. “I can make water easily enough—”

“Dihydrogen monoxide? If I could use that, well, there're lots of water fountains around.”

Click. Gurgle.

She giggled. “True. I'm not sure what else I can do – hydrogen isn't something magic usually deals with. Hmmmm.... I've got something here to create a fireball; that could be hydrogen, or something else.” She muttered to herself for a bit, running a long fingernail down along the writing. “I think it is – and I *might* be able to create it inside a container—”

“It has to be liquid hydrogen, Princess.”

“Liquid – that would pose a problem, wouldn't it?” She leafed through more pages. “I think I could work something out but it'd take time.”

“More than an hour?”

<Told you it wouldn't work, Allasan.>

<What do we have to lose at this point?>

The princess continued, oblivious to Nasalla's and my internal conversation. “Almost certainly. Now— Hmm, there might be something else—”

The eye I was currently controlling lit up. “Oh?”

Click. Gurgle.

“I have a number of polymorph spells here. I haven't been able to undo whatever transformed people here—”

<What's she talking about, Allasan?>

“Wait— Transformed?”

She turned and looked at me, her large eyes blinking in surprise. “You honestly don't know?”

“I've been... kind of busy.”

“Oh. About four hours ago a wave of ancient magic rolled through the entire convention. It transformed everybody here, in the grounds outside, in their rooms in the hotel, into whatever costume they were wearing. Some—”

Click. Gurgle.

<Duality—>

<That means that I'm the sane one—>

<Everybody's gone— Myths—>

“—people who were concentrating on the role of their costume became... consumed by that role. They lost all memory of who they were.”

Click. Gurgle.

I shook the eyestalk I was using to clear my head as I heard, maybe for



the first time, the loud thumping of our hearts. “Princess.... I didn’t know. I’ve— We’ve had different things on our minds.”

<My friends. Our offspring—>

<Nasalla?>

<Why’d you create me just to die, Allasan?>

<I didn’t create you.>

<Didn’t? You said yourself that you’d created my whole race, my whole society, even my Duality-damned memories! What she says just proves it. There’s no ship, there never was a ship!>

<So you accept that I’m not mad?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Accept? *Accept?* The information seems overwhelmingly in your favour! People becoming their costume, magic apparently working, and no damned ship communication!>

<There has to be something—>

<We can *die!* I can be magicked into existence, my whole race, my memories, my *dreams*, just so that you can have company for five hours. And then I die, and all – *all* of it – dies with me!>

The anger fed back and forth along our neural system. <Nasalla! Do you think I *wanted* this?>

<You know what’s worse, Allasan? *My* friends, *my* co-workers, *none* of them really exist! None of them *ever* existed! They’re not waiting for me in the Duality. They’re fake. *Unreal!*>

“Allasan, are you all right in there?” the princess asked.

<Nasalla, I never— I *never* planned on this! It was a dream, a story!>

<*Not to me!*>

Click. Gurgle.

<Well, I’m going to die too! In—> I checked— <forty-three minutes! I don’t want to die!>

<It doesn’t matter anymore, Allasan.>

<Of course it does!>

<*You* were the bubble boy, Allasan! You’d already beaten the odds of survival.>

<It’s not *my* fault that the stupid suit that *your* race designed has such a limited life support system!>

<My fault? Do you know *why* we started with only five hours hydrogen left? It’s obvious from your memories—>

<Oh, blame me—>

<Remember when you were a Solarian? Just before you created me to die, you had five hours and thirty two minutes of oxygen in *your* suit!>

Nasalla threw the memory he was talking about down our neural system and into my core so hard it hurt.

Click. Gurgle.

I had no choice and remembered the memory. *A quick check revealed that there was five hours and thirty two minutes of oxygen left.* <Dear God— Nasalla, sophantsibling, I'm—>

<Don't call me that! Don't—> His anger vanished. <No— You... you're right. It's not your fault. I know you too well to really believe that. It doesn't matter, Allasan. It's... it's done. Let's hear what this Solarian has to say. You... you do it. I need some time – some time to mourn—>

"Are you still alive in there?" the princess asked.

"I— Yes...." I could feel Nasalla's sobbing echoing through our shared neural system, even though he was trying to keep it to himself. "Sorry, it was a shock. You were saying?"

Click. Gurgle.

"Like I said, I don't really have any way yet of undoing whatever it is that Xanadu did to us, but I do have some polymorph spells here. I could polymorph, transform you, into something that could breathe oxygen."

"You can?"

"I... I think so. It wouldn't be easy – and it wouldn't be permanent—"

"How long?"

"It would last a few hours, maybe—"

A few hours! More time to find a solution!

She said something but I didn't hear— Life! To touch the world, to feel, to not be sheltered away. To breathe fresh air, not tanked hydrogen. To touch a leaf, to hear a bird sing not filtered through speakers—

<No!> Nasalla burst out.

Click. Gurgle.

I turned my attention back to him.

<No, I said. Ask her what it involves. Ask her to repeat it!>

<Nasalla?>

<Ask her!>

I turned away from my sophantsibling and looked at the Princess looking at me. "What would the change involve?"

"As I said, I could only change you, not your container."

"But—"

"If you could come out—"

<Allasan, we can't *survive* out there for more than a few seconds! And

there is no way to store the ammonia, to get back *into* the Environment Unit if we had to!>

<But a few more hours – anything could happen!>

<Allasan, I said *no*! Think about it! Tell her the *truth* about us! Tell her the *truth* and ask her!>

“Princess.... Do you know what I am?”

“By name, no—”

Click. Gurgle.

“Princess, I’m... I’m not alone here.”

“You’re not? But I can only sense one form—”

“Princess, this being I became – there are two of us sharing one body.”

“Two? You mean that the delusionary persona is separate from you! This would cure it—”

<*I am not delusionary!*> Nasalla churned the ammonia with clumps of tentacles.

“Princess, it’s not like that! It’s the race – one body, two minds—”

“Hmm. Well, the polymorph would put you into a single body. I think the two personalities would merge and the dominant one would remain with only memories of the secondary one.”

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, listen to what she’s saying!>

<Nasalla, I don’t want to die! There’s a chance here!>

<You think I want to die? I— I don’t want to— No, I *don’t* want to die!>

<Well, I don’t want to either!>

<You heard what she said! You’ll be saved, if it works, and I’ll just be left behind.>

<Maybe – and maybe you’ll be saved.>

<Not likely. You’ve always been the forceful one. I’m almost always just along for the ride.>

<But it’s all we’ve got!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, it’ll kill both of us. Whatever’s created, it won’t be *us*. It’ll be somebody else. It’ll be an *individual!*>

I tore my concentration back to the outside world. “Princess, I thank you for the offer, and... and... I’ll take it.”

<What are you doing, Allasan!>

<I’m taking the only hope we have to live!>

"It'll take a bit for me to set up the spell. I'll start now. I can't promise that it'll work though."

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla? What's wrong? It's not as though we have anything to lose. Are you all right?>

<All right? I... I don't know anymore.> He took control of a tentacle and switched off the emergency beacon.

<What are you doing?>

<It's obvious that we don't need that anymore.>

<Why not?>

<There's no ship. We're not going to be rescued.>

<Nasalla, I don't want to die!>

Click. Gurgle.

<I don't either! Even with— Even knowing— I want to live!>

<I don't know what else to do!>

<You heard her! *If* we survived opening the suit, *if*, then you'd live and I'd die, or more likely we'd become somebody else. And then there'd be no turning back!>

<But we'd live!>

<No, *you'd* live. Until the spell wears off— then you'd pop back into what we were, and then you'd die. End of it.>

<Nothing else has worked!>

Click. Gurgle.

<At least I can die, as *me*, as *us*!>

<But I don't want to die!>

<You're repeating yourself, Allasan.>

<It bears repeating.>

<Allasan— I'm half this partnership. I say *no*.>

I sucked down ammonia. <Nasalla, that's cruel and mean! You're condemning us, *me*, to die when there's hope.>

There was a long silence where the only sound was the beating of our shared hearts and the click gurgle of the support system.

Finally Nasalla spoke: <Allasan.... You're right.>

<Of course I am!>

<Something may live. I don't know what, but something will. And that's worth the risk.>

<Of course it is!> I'm going to live! I'm going to live!

<Allasan, I... I would like to ask you, my sophantsibling, a favour.>

I'm going to live! I'm going to live! <Anything, Nasalla.>

<I have a memory. It's one— It's the most precious one that I have, that

you, that the original Allasan, the Allasan I remember, had.> I let him have control of our gills as I could feel him trembling.

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, take my half of the memory. Experience it. Remember it! I want... I want that memory – our memory – to live, whatever happens. Will you?>

I'm going to live! I'm going to live! <Sure, Nasalla. Sophantsibling. But you'll be with me.>

<Will I? I don't know, you don't know, *she* doesn't know. If both of us have this memory, then it's more likely to live. A last fragment of the Lalannas to survive.> I felt him gulp ammonia through our gills frantically. <Please—>

I felt cold and alone. But, I was going to live! <Nasalla, sophantsibling, I'll take it and do my best. It's... it's all I can offer.>

He took control of most of our tentacles and wrapped them around my primary neural cluster and gently squeezed. <Thank you.>

Click. Gurgle.

<It's no problem, Nasalla, sophantsibling.>

Gently he pushed a large ordered pulse of electro-chemical reaction down his primary neural cord to the junction where his met mine, and I let it flow back up and into my primary neural cluster. I could feel that it was loved, that it had been shared again and again, that it had changed with each remembering – each instance subtly altering the chemical bonds and structure. I could feel Nasalla trembling.

The best I can describe is that I dove into it, that's what it felt like. Biologically I linked its neural-electrical structure into my own, and let it flow through the knot of my consciousness.

Regardless, I remembered—

ALONE.

*Dark.*

*Light.*

*Swim.*

*Grow.*

*Alone.*

*Dark—*

Over and over again. Mindless repetition as I grew—

*Large.*

*Alone.*

*Large.*

*Need.*

*Other?*

I can see a form nearby. Larger than the little things around me. I can sense it; it can sense me. We draw closer, helpless to move away.

*Other!*

*Closer!*

*Seek!*

I swim faster and faster, jetting through the ammonia. Tiny ones are sucked through my jet, through my gills. Some don't make it. But I'm not thinking. I don't realize. I have only one thing in my mind.

*Lonely.*

*Seek.*

*Collision.*

I collide, my jet, my gills, slamming into the other. Pain. Blood. The soft flesh tears. Blood oozes around us. The pieces, the flaps of flesh, intertwine and curl against each other. The fine filament of my gills mingles with the other, blood rich filaments merging with others.

Merging—

<We are.>

<I am.>

<He is.>

<I am Nasalla.>

<I am Allasan.>

<We are Nasallallasan.>

Our bodies merge, bound at our gills, our neural cords tangling.

<I think. We think.>

Our instincts merge, feeling out the new pathways. Feeling out how to think as myself watches.

<Around us there is liquid. Liquid is a medium. A thing. It has existence.>

<Light. Light changes. Changes with time.>

<Time.>

Our thoughts, no concepts, flow past each other, swirling in each primary neural cluster. Some are taken, some are rejected. Lobes of each our of clusters vote. Re-arrange. Decide. Think.

<We are.>

<We live.>

<We think.>

Sentience blossoms upon me. Instincts become thoughts. Concepts become ideas. Now splits into past, present and future.

The world shifts, changing from what is, to what was, what is, and what will be.

<I am Nasalla. And I am Allasan.>

The world becomes a place of colour, of wonder, a thing to learn about. Before it just was, now it is and can be known.

<I am. We are.>

<No longer alone.>

<Never alone.>

We hug, celebrate our existence, our knowledge, our eternal companionship.

Sentience.

We look around in wonder and amazement, in comprehension, at the world we shared. At the world we'd never be lonely in again. At a world inviting us to explore it!

I BLINKED AT THE END OF THE MEMORY.

As a Solarian I was born. Mindless, still forming. My brain matured and I learned how to remember the world. I learned light and dark, colour and sound.

I learned loneliness. Eternal loneliness.

Taking control of an eyestalk I turned it and looked upon myself, ourself. We floated, a tangled web of red-purple vines, of all kinds of thicknesses and colour variations. Tubes were wrapped around and a pinkish liquid moved up and down our veins and arteries. There were two distinct groups, each dominated by either red or purple. They met in a tangled knot around a complex of biological jets that contained our gills. The jets normally sucked ammonia in and out, but could also be used for movement.

<Nasalla?>

<Yes, Allasan?>

<That was....> I couldn't describe it.

<I know. But your half is gone. Gone forever. And soon I will—>

I wrapped tentacles around my sophantsibling's primary neural cluster and gently squeezed.

<Nasalla, I felt—>

"Allasan, Nasalla? I think I'm ready," the translated voice of the princess broke my train of thoughts.

Broke the marriage of sharing.

Click. Gurgle. *Beeeeep!*

Both Nasalla and I checked the system. That was it – no more hydrogen.

Nasalla used a tentacle and shut the alarm down.

<Nasalla?>

<Tell her you're ready.>

I gulped ammonia, already feeling hydrogen starvation though I knew that wasn't possible.

I thought of surviving longer. Of living. Of living *alone*.

<Nasalla— It's... it's *wrong!*>

I couldn't do it. Now now.

<Allasan?>

<What you, what I, what *we* have – it's a miracle. I didn't know—>

<Go! Save what you can!>

<Nasalla, *no!* We're sophantsiblings. I think that – maybe – I know what that is now.>

<Allasan, you have to save the memories of what you created! There's nothing else I have—>

<I'd rather die with you than steal a few more hours of loneliness.>

<I— Allasan, you can't—>

<We'll remember together, as long as we live. And when we die— Well, we'll both join the Duality.>

<Allasan, just *do* it— Don't let a figment of your imagination drag you to death.>

"Whenever you're ready, Allasan," came from the translation matrix.

Nasalla tried to answer, but I wouldn't let him. <Nasalla! Listen to me! I will *not* leave you! Like those who have gone before us, we'll die *together!*>

We struggled, but Nasalla's heart wasn't in it.

"Allasan...?"

Finally, Nasalla just collapsed, and I hugged him against me as he sobbed. I sent a response through the translation matrix: "Princess. I've... I've changed my mind. The price is too high. I'm going to die anyway. I'd rather die like this."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm... positive. Completely positive." I could feel our gills start to labour as the ratio of dissolved hydrogen decreased.

"Three hours is a long time, Allasan," said the princess.

Nasalla just sobbed against me. "I'll— We'll be fine." Only a few more minutes and then we'd die together, remembering what I'd created. "But thank—"

"Ambassador Kikicluthk! There you are!"

Nasalla and I both moved an eyestalk and looked out at the MIB.



He spoke in his dull monotone and we waited for the translation. “I’ve found a technical expert who should be able to modify your Environment Unit to process water into liquid hydrogen.” He motioned to another human beside him – a man in a red Starfleet shirt.

The same one we’d met at the elevator.

“Do you give him permission to modify your environment suit, Ambassador Kikicluthk? According to the Tycho—”

“Yes!” I screamed through the translation matrix.

Then he went to work. I disabled the warnings of the Environment Unit’s system integrity being violated as I gulped ammonia past our gill faster and faster. According to onboard chronometers it was only three minutes, but to us it seemed forever. I just held Nasalla and rocked him back and forth as I, we, waited.

Click. Gurgle. Click. Gurgle. Click. Gurgle.

<We live?> Nasalla whispered.

<It seems so.>

<But everything I know is a dream—>

<Everything but me.>

I PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON the document Dr Sands had requested when we joined Project X. I could understand why he wanted complete details of what had happened to us. We were one of the weirder results of the Xanadu Effect.

<What do you think, Nasalla?>

<I think it’s a bit too accurate.>

<Oh?>

Click. Gurgle.

<He doesn’t need to know about us.> Nasalla edited the record so that there was only I.

<If he asks Elisandra Melisande Blueleaf he might get suspicious—>

Nasalla added a slow delusory state brought on by the decreasing hydrogen as the Environment Unit went into conservation mode.

<Okay, Nasalla, why?>

<He wants us to sign a contract. You sign it. As far as he knows, you’re it.>

<But that’s lying!>

<That’s keeping our options open. The ship *may* come back still.>

<Hah!>

<You never know!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

I did a last read through and sent off the message into Project X's intranet. Our environment suit had an adaptable data interface that could downgrade output to successfully use Solarian data systems.

I took an eyestalk and looked at Nasalla's primary neural cluster, and he took another one and looked at mine.

<Boy, will *he* be surprised if the ship returns!> I said.

Nasalla didn't say anything, and I forced back tears. I didn't know what was wrong with him. Physically nothing, but mentally.... He knew that everything he knew was a lie, a product of my imagination.

We downloaded more of the pikachu recordings and statements of meaning, and dove into our latest translation project. Soon a whole room for us would be complete, but for now we could survive.

The only time Nasalla came alive was when we worked – and I was getting as much work as we could handle. I'd save him, no matter what the cost.

Maybe working on the Alytherian language, and the dictionary would pull him out of it—

## XANADU: NOW I WILL BELIEVE THERE ARE UNICORNS

XANADU!

Unlike most, I wasn't here for the costumes. I was here to sneak in and maybe buy a little art. Yes, *that* kind of art. The kind that I hid and looked at with a flashlight under my covers, even though I lived alone and was well of age. The one magical escape I had from my life of low paid mundane drudgery.

It just didn't feel right looking at them on a desk in the sunlight—

In years before the convention had been more oriented towards art, and I'd never felt out of place just going as myself, but this year was different. Some rich guy had decided to turn it into a costume extravaganza. And so, unlike years previous, I did feel out of place. The odd man out. Even here, as I seemed to be everywhere else.

Given why I was secretly here, I just felt worse.

At first I didn't know what to do, but then I ran into my saviour. It seemed that I wasn't the only one feeling odd and noticeable. A number of enterprising individuals had capitalized on that by selling small and cheap ears and noses that people could wear and join the fun, or not feel so out of place. The variety wasn't great, but it was good enough that I could choose.

Something grabbed my attention. There, hanging by itself, was a small tiara with a little yellow plush horn at the front and two white ears at the sides. A little touch of unicorn for the deprived. A dream.

Here I was, secretly preparing to buy the lower end of the furry porn art industry, still a male virgin, my only satisfaction being under the covers in the darkness with the pictures before me, and there was the costume of the symbol of purity and virginity. A symbol of the magic I'd lost so long ago.

How could I resist? So, ignoring the odd look the dealer gave me when I bought a little girl's bit of fancy, I paid my ten dollars and put it on. I felt a little silly, but I also felt a little safer and a little more camouflaged with the pack. Off to the art room!

The room was smaller than it had been in years past, squeezed into one of the lesser chambers to make room for the costumes. But the variety, as always, was bewildering. And at the entrance—

At the entrance was this wondrous image of a unicorn, pure, sweet, innocent, standing beneath a last twisted tree, surrounded by an endless field of burned stumps and tracks of machinery. She was facing off a monstrous steaming engine of destruction, massive riveted plates of ebony iron on a body covered in scratches and dings, and bits of leaf and dirt, treads heavy with mud and ground plant life, thick black smoke thumping out of its battered smokestack.

A damning statement if I'd ever seen one.

I stopped, and looked at it, feeling with a bit of embarrassment the cheap little tiara. On my head a child's toy, a child's dream, a child's magic; before me a very adult imagery of the way the world was going. There was no perversion in the costume I'd picked, no dreams of being a girl, just memories—

Closing my eyes, I dreamed of my youth, of my innocence lost, of when I'd believed in magic. When I was young, and foolish, and naïve, and the world was a place of wonder and light. Not the bitter loneliness it had turned into.

My eyes still shut, a tear speckling in them at all I'd lost, the dream changed. I saw myself as that unicorn, standing there on four hooves, staring out at the world of technology and classification, defiant, doomed. A last guardian of purity and nature and magic before the rapacity of humankind. Trying to save the world, trying to save the magic, as the humans turned it all to the dust and rationality of *science*.

And my mind blurred—

ELSEWHERE, THE RICH GUY who'd changed the focus of the convention felt an ancient pent-up magic pour through him and explode out upon the convention. Instantly everyone changed, becoming what their costume had only let them pretend to be. Some were completely lost in their roles—

—I WAS STANDING THERE, SMALL, INNOCENT. All around me the stench of man, of disease, of will forced upon the natural way.

I blinked, raised my long glimmering horn, and looked around at the

artwork, at the people who were just starting to panic. Looking around at the stained wood and poured concrete and formed plastic—

It hurt, oh it hurt! The smoke, the pollution, the foulness of metal and iron. The ghosts of dead trees in the wall screamed at me, cursing me for failing. Stone wailed at memories of being crushed and reformed, hating me that I still stood, having failed in my task.

How could anything like this happen? Where were my fellow sisters, my brothers?

An anthropomorphic rabbit just stared at me.

I shuddered, feeling the cold iron, the radiation, the unfiltered sun, the chemicals, the toxins, all pouring upon me.

Screaming, I leapt forward, my silver hooves leaving the floor and my horn shining with a pure light that fought a doomed fight against the weight of industrialization looming everywhere. I pierced the veils of reality and leapt away, fleeing the weight of change—

—and bounded back into existence standing at the edge of a river in a stone valley surrounded by trees.

But even here my kind had failed!

I shuddered, hearing the wails of trees young and stunted, missing the dimly remembered wisdom of their elders, chopped down before nature could take them to nurture their children. Looking down at my image wavering in the waters of the river, I heard but a single fish sobbing at the foul stench of the water it gulped, at the water grumbling about how it had been moved and shoved off its rightful path. A thin sheen of chemical glistened on the surface, so fine that only the magic of my horn illuminated it so that it glistened in a foul rainbow of horror and waste.

It was odd, horrifying and beautiful. I looked at my reflection in the glistening, almost magical chemical glow. My pure white hide, my dainty ivory hooves, my tangled long mane, my thin horn that almost touched the surface of the water as I looked, my fine deer-like face. It all glistened and glowed in the oily sheen.

How could something so beautiful be so wrong? But it was! It burned me. Standing there was like leaning into a vast gale with all my strength. The poor waters, the stream, the fish—

Where had it all gone wrong?

I reared up, neighing in horror and anger. Dimly I could hear the growl of machines, the roar of far too many people. Leaping up, I shoved my glistening horn through reality, piercing the veil and leaping into nothingness—

—and bounded back into existence in a lonely field glittering with drops

of dawn dew. All around echoed the sounds of birds just awakening, chirping their glory at the new day.

But even here I could sense the loss, the pain of things killed. Iron and glowing nuclear decay along the surface. Tiny cells that worked by chance, not by design as they slowly forgot what they had to do.

Where had it all gone wrong? I leapt again into nothingness—

—and onto the sands of the ocean. The salt was strong in my nostrils, the call of birds in the distance, the shush of waves on the shore. And all around me people, thousands and thousands of humans. One, a small girl, looked at me, pointed, smiled. I could see the magic in her, the dreams—

The dreams that were dying in the banality all around. All around, the sea of humanity, lying in the sand, walking, talking, tossing their crushed tree and mutated oil waste on the dirty grains. I could sense the water crying at the stains and toxins that oozed through it.

And one small spot of magic, of dream, slowly being crushed underhoof.

No! No! I bounded again and pierced the veil, horn glowing—

—and landed with a clatter of hooves in a valley of shattered stone. All around me the rock cried and sobbed, ripped and torn apart, its hidden gems yanked out and the rock that had caressed and held them tossed and abandoned on the side. Weeds grew because nothing else could in the cracks left in the rock. All around there were bits of rusting metal from mechanical treads, carbon soot from mechanisms of technology, and chemical waste from explosives that had first shattered the rock asunder.

Was there nothing left? I leapt again—

—and landed in a field of shaped stone glistening with crystal squares. All around me things whirled and clicked and grinded and roared. Monoxides spewed into the air, oils dripped on the tarred crushed rock. Spirits sobbed and cried, all alone without those they'd spent eternities with. And everywhere humans. Thousands and thousands and millions of humans, all turning to stare. A camera flashed, its harsh light searing my flesh.

I leapt—

—and landed in a snow swept wasteland, my hooves sinking deep into billows of soft snow as the clean wind howled and swept around me, whipping my mane back and forth. I took a step and listened, and I could hear the ground groan and weep as the black liquids were pumped out and taken far, far away to be changed and torn apart.

Humans were everywhere! I leapt—

—to a carpet of crushed stone where thousands of steel coffins roared by.

And I leapt—

—to a forest of thin tiny trees all neatly arranged for harvest in a month, to decorate a living room or a hallway as they died.

I leapt again and again, from one place to another. It was all different, changed, warped, the natural order ripped away, the magic gone. Gone!

Panic swept through me and I leapt further and further, staying a shorter and shorter time. The world was fading, the magic a distant shadow of what it had been.

And of my kind, nothing. Nothing! Everywhere signs of our failure. Proof that the humans had warped and changed the world we were supposed to protect.

Vast deserts of sand where there had once been trees.

Seas of dying dirt with waves of monoculture wheats. Winds blew away grains of soil to be lost in the waters. The naked, lifeless rock beneath coming closer and closer to the surface as the rich loam flew over the oceans and sank to choke the life there.

How had it gone so wrong?

Finally I stopped, high on a mountain overlooking jungle drowned rivers beneath a mist of rain and cloud. And even there, in the distance, hints of smoke and the nearly inaudible whine of combustion powered saws wafted hundreds of miles across the shrinking wilderness, mocking my failure. My complete failure.

I staggered forward, crystal tears dripping from my eyes.

I was too late. Too small, too alone. The world was doomed, left in the hands of the naïve who destroyed instead of built.

I sobbed, standing there, watching, hearing the world cry its pain.

Before me there was a small pool. Quiet, serene. A last bit of innocence that remained in a world of horror and hopelessness.

I took a step forward, letting the still ice water, pure, cold, caress my forehooves.

And yet, even here, I could feel specks of isotopes, shards of processed metal, of mercury, all gathered from the atmosphere.

Leaning forward I bowed, the weight of the world on my shoulders too heavy to bear, and let my long spiral horn pierce the water.

It was all in the hands of one naïve species who didn't know what they were doing and who had not the will to stop it. Glistening tears dripped down my muzzle and plinked into the water, sending shimmering light through the depths.

I stopped and turned my head and looked out, out across the jungle.

There was hope. They had the power; if only they had the will. They had the innocence, the magic, before it was buried under technology and science. If only—

Flicking my long thin tail in sorrow, and in hope, a dream filled me. A possibility.

If they had the will...

I stood straighter, prouder, the last of my kind. Then I leaned down, pierced the waters with my long ivory horn and pushed the magic up and into it. It grew and flowed, pouring out of me like rain into parched ground. I focused it, gave it will, power, near-sentience. More and more of myself I poured into it, poured into the waters swirling in that pool. I felt my soul flicker, weaken, and the magic weakened for a moment as my will panicked at the thought of the end of my immortality, but I closed my eyes and shoved it out of me, shoved it into the water.

A spring burst into existence in the depths. Water, pure, innocent, clean, untainted, gurgled up, brought here by my magic.

But it wasn't enough! All my magic, it would take all of it! I shoved the dreams and memories of the cost – of what could be, of what *would* be, unless things changed – into a warning, a dream, a power to want, to need to change.

The magic poured out of me, glowing a brilliant green-white that glistered off the water and shone over the valley and towards the sea. It was a great magic, a powerful magic, a last magic. A dream that would give life and hope and skill and need to some of those who would drink the water. Maybe. Possibly. A gift of dreams of what the world was, and what the world could be again. A gift of magic.

My light faded and my skin turned drab and gray as I felt death seeping in to me, harvesting my life. The last little bits of magic glimmered out and I fell, watching the dream flow and mingle in the water.

Distantly I could hear the souls of my kind calling me away. Calling me to rest as I'd done what I could. The water overflowed the basin and began to tumble down the mountain, rich with purity and magic and dreams and warnings. Rich with hope.

My body collapsed, melting into dust that settled and twirled in the water. My soul left the husk to join my fellows, hoping and praying that the dream I'd created would save the world, hoping that one day humanity would believe that once there were unicorns—



*Michael often had a knack for finding interesting angles to explore in the settings he wrote in. The Xanadu setting was no exception, providing him surprisingly fertile ground given the setting's modest roots. When I wrote the first Xanadu story my goal was to create a universe that was easy to play in, with plot devices that could be used for a huge variety of purposes but not much need for depth. The premise was simple; a large, fictional convention in Orlando receives the patronage of a wealthy benefactor who on a whim funded a series of costume contests. Unbeknownst to him the driving force behind this impulse was a magical antique raven mask he'd acquired, and at the height of the convention the mask unleashed its power on the attendees. Everyone at the convention who was in costume at that moment was transformed into whatever it was that they'd been costumed as.*

*Even simple settings require coherent guidelines underlying them or their stories might as well stand alone. In the case of Xanadu, the biggest challenge to coherency was usually the question of what, exactly, a person's costume should represent. What would the magic make of someone dressed as a cat? Would they remain human in size and shape or would they shrink and wind up on all fours? If the person was wearing a collar was that considered an integral part of the costume, or just a meaningless article of clothing? Were feline behaviours part of the effect, or even a whole new fictional persona? In Xanadu it was established that a costume represented whatever the wearer himself thought it represented - whether or not he was thinking of it consciously at the time. The goal was to maximize flexibility for authors but as a useful side effect it offered an avenue to help get inside a character's head.*

*In "Losing Himself" Michael uses Xanadu's magic to explore part of what costuming represented to one particular costume maker.*

*~ Bryan Derksen*

## XANADU: LOSING HIMSELF

BRIAN LOOKED AT THE FUR ON THE BED as he dried himself. Three month's work, assorted panic moments, and then the stupid airline had lost the parcel! Sure, he'd insured it, but he'd *still* lived in terror of telling the buyer that his fursuit had been lost. Handing money back is small consolation at the loss of a dream.

But, they'd found it, and here it was.

He checked the time. The costume judging was starting, but then he wasn't interested in it. He knew his niche, and the client didn't mind delivery after the judging – he was acting as the *furless lackey* for somebody in the contest.

Now was time for the final inspection. He'd just brushed it, the fur was sleek and floofy. Everything was there, no obvious seam failures, no tears or rips. Still, he preferred to put it on one last time. A final inspection before handing it over. Later he'd have some fun in his own.

It was odd. He'd worked hard to get to where he was. Not a big maker, but a popular one. Enough to pay the bills even though he still worked part time just to make enough to cover basic bills in case of a slowdown. He didn't have the drive, the skill, the artistic ability to get into the big leagues. Creating the suits that made everybody shit their pants.

But, there was a market for cheaper basic *cartoony* suits. The mind blowing jobs ran into multiple thousands, his were just over a thousand. He was happy, his clients were happy, and all was good.

Though, there were times he wished—

Taking a few steps away, he opened his luggage and rustled around until he found the full body zentai, though the eyes and mouth were open. It served a whole bunch of purposes – kept him cooler, let him put the suits on easier, and allowed him to guarantee the customer a more *pristine* product. It didn't take long for him to wiggle into it, and soon he was a slightly-overweight figure in dull brown lycra, except for his eyes and the skin around his lips.

He'd learned long ago to keep his hair short – made fitting and wearing far easier.

Now—

He pulled up the one chair in the room and lifted the furred body suit from the bed. It was bright green, almost eye searing, but that was what the client wanted. Bright, *bright* green, with white chest and airbrushed dark green tiger stripes along the back. A big floofy skunk-like tail, again in green, but with the double white stripe. Green footpaws and handpaws with black claws and white pawpads, and some tufts of darker green at the wrists and palms, and along the back of the ankle – a kind of feathering.

He'd given up understanding the designs people wanted long ago. There were so *many* weirdo crossbreeds and personal creations.

The head was a big skunk head. Green, with friendly blue eyes and a big floofy pile of dark green headhair. The ears were extra large, and set off slightly to the side.

First went on the bodysuit. Sure, he'd done it many times before, but there was ritual, a mindset that he changed into, the fears and follies of his real life falling away. To him it was the final christening of a suit. He never wore the full thing until the final inspection. It made no sense, but he felt it helped bring the fanciful costumes to life.

The bodysuit was one piece, and he stepped into the leggings and pulled the belt out that was sewn into heavy bands at the back to support the tail. It was a weight lifter's belt, and it had to go snug as the tail on this one was close to half the weight of the entire suit. He clicked it shut, and felt the weight of the tail pull down even as its tip tickled against his neck. His arms went into the arms of the suit and he zipped up the chest, securing the flap that hid the zipper with a strip of white fur. The suit was baggy on him, but the customer had a bigger build and was a little shorter. The costume pulled at Brian's shoulders and crotch. He'd help the client with the final fitting, and make any adjustments necessary. If the duct tape dummy was accurate, there shouldn't be any.

After that it went quickly. The feet went on like fuzzy winter boots, sliding over the bodysuit legs. There was a bit of fumbling before his fingers found the snap buttons that would keep the boots up. The hands, four-fingered for once, wiggled on, and again there were the snap buttons hidden in the fur above his wrist to keep the hands from sliding and sagging.

Standing up he wiggled his body, stretched one leg and another, and then jumped a couple of times to get it to settle right. Definitely didn't fit him, but it wasn't too far off. The tail – he'd have made it smaller, but the client was always right.

He walked over and looked down at the head looking up at him. The handpaws were a bit clumsy, but not too bad, and he picked the head up, looking inside as he switched on the two fans. Even though it was covered with thin lycra, he could see the shape of the mesh framework he'd used to shape the head. Already he could feel himself sweating. At least the customer hadn't insisted on glass or plastic eyes which always wanted to fog up. They'd gone with his suggestion of mesh eyes which had good vision, and no chance of fogging.

With the ease of long practice, he lifted up the head and settled it on his shoulders. There were no straps or clips; its weight would hold it down. The neck was loose. It didn't have a really snug fit like a high end balaclava head, but that was fine with him. The ones he'd tried were always a bastard to zip up right, and even more of a bastard to unzip to get off. Got forbid he'd ever start to feel faint in one of those—

The fans were loud in his ears, but the eyes weren't positioned quite

right; vision would be better for the client, but he could manage enough. Walking over to the mirror, he felt the tail wagging a bit from his motion. Looking at himself he smiled, even though the partly open mouth was always smiling. Everything looked complete, okay. The cool air hummed through the ears, through the fans, and against his head and neck.

Brian cocked his head a bit to look through one eye, trying to get the best view he could. The fans hummed, the tail flopped, and he frowned at the wrinkles in the suit.

*Until the wrinkles vanished.*

He stared, unable to move, as the suit stretched and shrunk before his eyes. Seams moved slightly, fur panels shrunk or stretched. The slippers stretched a bit to fit more comfortably. The head eyes moved slightly closer together and he could see far better.

And the suit fit him perfectly.

Which was impossible.

He must have been imagining it – that was it!

Looking again in the mirror, he cursed. How could he have been so *stupid*? He must have substituted his own measurements for the client's? Jesus, he was so screwed. Fuck!

The door swung open and his roommate, Felix, burst, slamming it shut. Sweating, with what looked like blood on his arm, he grabbed the chair and shoved it against the door with a loud thud.

Brian pulled the head off, the air cool on his naked flesh, and gingerly put it down on the table. "Felix, what's going on?"

"What the— Of course— How could I—" He took a deep breath and flopped down in the chair, using his weight to make the door even more secure. "Brian, I have *no* clue. I was at the judging – you knew about—"

Brian nodded.

"Some— I don't know! If I wasn't there— Brian, you have to believe me. I saw what I saw. The rich guy, what's his name, became a *crow* on the stage. A *crow*! And he *flew*! And then everybody—"

Brian wondered what the prank was, and his disbelief must have shown on his face.

"Brian, if *ever* you loved Clark Ashton Smith's writing, if ever you loved what I gave you, you *have* to believe me! It happened! He became a bird. And then everybody, *everybody*, became their costu— Oh hell.... Brian, were you wearing anything during the judging? That fursuit of yours?"

"Of course I was. And *nothing* happened! Felix, I don't know what the hell you're going on about, but I'm not going to bite. I'm pissed off

enough already – somehow I screwed up the measurements and I have no *clue* what the hell I’m going to do! So, just don’t give me any shit right now – please?”

Felix sighed. “ Brian, humour me. Just take it off. What did you say its name was – ?”

“The buyer hasn’t named it, though I’ve called it *Stinky Green*.”

“Take it off.”

“Fine! I’ll take it off, and you, or whomever, can snap pictures of me in a brown zentai. Whopsido!” With that Brian sat down and unclipped the gloves and pulled them off, and unclipped the feet and pulled them off, and unzipped the bodysuit and pulled *it* off.

And stood there. Naked. Not just physically, but he felt panicked. He couldn’t help but look around nervously, feeling helpless, unprotected, cold—

Felix stared. He spoke. “Umm... Brian... umm... you—you’re naked.”

“Naked? *What?*” He looked down and saw that everything was hanging out. No wonder he was so cold. But... how? Spinning around, the carpet rough on the sole of his foot, he looked at the bed, and at *Stinky Green* sitting there, neatly folded. And, sticking out of the bodysuit, somehow, was the brown zentai he’d been wearing. How the *hell* did that happen? He must have taken it off. That was it, there was no other possible explanation for it. “Felix, I have no *clue* what you did to me, but stop it. Now!”

Unfolding the green and white fur, he pulled the zentai out and wiggled back into it. He finished pulling the back zipper up and was instantly wonderfully warm and hugged and safe. The cold nakedness of the zentai had been replaced with the warm full enclosure of a fursuit. Fans whirled in his ears, and he looked out and down along a silvery muzzle.

“It did get you—” Felix held his head in his hands.

Brian could conceive of Felix lying to play a joke. He could conceive of some kind of – hypnotic suggestion? – to get him to take the zentai off without conscious knowledge. But... but *this*? Turning, he padded over to the mirror, feeling the slight give of the spongy soles of the footpaws he was suddenly wearing.

He stopped and stared.

There, staring back, was a silver fox, long bushy tail hanging down behind, long pointed ears with his trademark extra fuzziness, a well formed muzzle, and thick white bellyfur. Holding up a handpaw he looked at the fleece pawpads with the silver-white fur sewn around.

Blinking some sweat out of his eyes, he remembered. Somebody

had proposed a silver fox, though more white than silver. There'd been some sketches, but then the commissioner had vanished, no explanation. Nothing. He'd never even ordered the fur.

And yet, here he was.

Half unbelieving, he reached up and pulled off the head. He didn't want to, but he did anyway. He looked inside. Yup, mesh construction, he could see it behind the liner. And the stitches – he'd always had to hand do those – and each stitch was neat. And utterly, completely, *perfect*, as though done by a machine.

And that simply wasn't possible.

Numbers ran through his head. He could get a full zentai for \$50. This suit, with his name attached, he could sell for hundreds, maybe even a thousand, easy. Jesus Christ, he was going to be rich!

Shoving back the fears and rejection of the very idea of desuited, and with a bit less than usual care he put the head down on the bed on top of *Stinky Green*, and unbuttoned the handpaws and footpaws and pulled them off, and fumbled around until he found the zipper for *Silver Fox* and pulled it down. Stepping out of the bodysuit, he put it on the bed—

And stared at a brown zentai.

He shivered—

It didn't make sense. And he was so alone—

Before he even knew what he was doing, he was clambering back into the brown zentai. And, when the zipper was done—

He was surrounded in warm fur with the comforting hum of fans in his ears. Checking the mirror showed he was wearing a brown cartoony deer, with plantigrade plush hooves and big wide silly eyes. And he *never* wanted to take it off.

He shook his head, the floofy antlers shaking with a slight delay as they were floppy and not solid. What the hell?

Forcing down his fear, his chill, he stripped out of the deer and the last piece he tossed off stretched and twisted with the other pieces back into the brown zentai. He shivered, whether with fear or coldness or aloneness he couldn't say. Yanking open one of the drawers, he pulled out a pair of underwear—

"Hey! That's mine!"

And shoved it on—

—and was wearing a bright blue bodysuit with white furry chest.

He wanted to stop, but couldn't, and put on a pair of socks which shifted into big wide bunnyfeet, and a pair of gloves that became floofy

bunnyhands as a silly bunnyhead with one floppy ear over one of its eyes swelled up and over his head, surrounding him in warm comfort and softly whirring fans.

“Brian...?”

That was when Brian *knew*. There were people that would kill to be in the position he was now in. But then, they’d never worked out what it really meant. *Fursuiting, forever. Fun and games, forever.*

At first glance.

Brian threw himself onto his bed, carelessly throwing *Stinky Green* onto the floor, almost tearing one of the ears off. He curled up, hugging himself, rocking himself back and forth.

Felix just stared. He’d never seen anything like it.

After all, how many times did you see a floofy blue bunny with big floppy feet and ears, hugging itself, smiling?

And spilling out from the grinning mouth, the sounds of sobbing, audible over the softly whirring fans.

BRIAN LOOKED AT DR BENTON QUEST – Dr Sands, as the doctor, another Xanadu victim, looked back. Today Brian was wearing his personal fursuit, a brown otter with a *loud* Hawaiian shirt built in over the body. Pantless of course. At least whatever had happened to him hadn’t forced him to lug around a surfboard or a beachball – Brian was sitting in a padded chair, a portion of the back removed to make room for those with tails, but he was holding the fat fuzzy brown snake-like tail in his lap and petting it to try and get him to ignore how uncomfortable he was with the otterhead sitting on a table behind him. Though couldn’t see it, he knew it was there, with its comforting all enclosing fur and happy warm hum of fans—

“Mr Brian Harold Tadwell, of Toronto, Canada? At least that’s what your official records show.”

“That’s me. Don’t worry, I still remember my life, clearly.” Too many other Xanadu victims had forgotten theirs. There were people he’d once known who now *were* their fursuits, and who actually *fainted* when he popped off his head to get a drink.

His head—

“I know. That was all clarified in your preliminary examination.”

Brian nodded.

Dr Quest— Sands shuffled some papers. “We’ve sent home pretty well everybody we can. Some can’t function in what we consider normal society. And then, there’s you....”

Brian sighed, snuggling his... the suit's tail for strength. He could almost feel his pawhands... gloves rubbing along it....

"You have one of the more extreme cases of what we call the *Clothing Curse*. It's rare, maybe ten cases. We can't be sure though – sadly, accurate records weren't kept of either attendance, or of what happened to everybody."

Brian sighed. "Fine. Let's cut to the chase. What are you going to do with me?"

Dr Quest took a sip from the water on his desk. "Would you like some?" He motioned towards a large sealed jug with a straw.

Brian had been a suiter for years. He knew better than to refuse, and gratefully took the jug and sipped. Not too much – he didn't want to shock his system, and God knew what would happen if doctors tried to cut him out of his fursuit.

"Anyway, legally, anyway, we can't hold you. You're psychologically stable, and your... powers don't seem to constitute any conceivable threat or danger."

"Ha!" What harm could a guy permanently in an otter suit do? Or whatever kind of suit he ended up with on any given day.

"But, there is the question of.... What are you going to do? From what we've been able to learn, Clothing Curses can be particularly nasty. There's this one rabbit—" He took off his glasses and polished them. "Mr Tadwell, I'll be frank. We've had some minor luck with getting people's actual memories back. Very limited though. And some of the minor effects we can do something about. But—" he put his glasses back on, "Clothing Curses have survived everything we've tried. Not that we've tried much – the first few made the situation far worse than it was originally. Worse, I'm afraid than yours."

"So, what now then?" He needed his head back – maybe he could think then – Brian took another sip of the warm water.

"Yours, I'm afraid, is almost dangerous. From our tests, it's not only a physical effect, but also a psychological effect. Almost an addiction. You *need* to wear a... fursuit as much, or more, than you're forced to by the curse. And, it's getting worse. There are some things I can try that might minimize the psychological effects—"

"No!" The words were out of Brian before he even knew he'd said them.

"That solves that then. Mr Tadwell, I'm not allowed to be a charity, at



least not in cases where the victim is mentally competent and capable of functioning in normal society. People wear costumes all the time, and they get by.”

“And they have to stop—”

“A very indicative choice of words on your part. I really wish you’d agree to some psychological counseling. I don’t think that even you realize how seductive your psychological addiction is becoming.”

“No. I’m fine. Just fine the way I am.” A tiny part of Brian screamed at the words, but that bit was overwhelmed by the *horror* at the merest *hint* of having not to live all the time in the warm all comforting fakefur, living in the laughing, happy, fursuit persona. The scream died, submerged in comforting fuzzy hugs and fuzzy happy thoughts.

“Well then, your choice. I have no legal ability to force you, and no reason to hold you any longer. Your friend—” he glanced down at the paper, “Mr Felix Kunzel, is waiting for you. He’ll take you back home. But then, he brought you down in the first place.”

Brian leaped to his feet, his tail slapping against the chair. He could put his head back on!

“One more thing, Mr Tadwell.”

Brian stopped and looked at the doctor.

“After consultation with the Ontario authorities, your driver’s license has been suspended pending review and retesting. In essence, there are strong psychological reasons to suggest that you would drive whilst fully-clothed. As your clothing significantly restricts your vision to an unsafe level, the decision was made at my urging for both your and the public’s safety. I would restrict it further, but there’s no legal recourse to prevent you from riding, say, a bike. In six months you may undergo psychological assessment and this decision may be appealed depending on the results.” Dr Quest stood up and handed over a folder. “These are your papers. Now you’re free to go. I wish you the best of luck.”

Brian grabbed the folder, the papers thoughtfully stapled together and paper clipped to it, and mumbled thanks. He ran over to where his head was, dropped the folder to the table, and put his head back on, submerging himself in the warm fur, the limited version, and the heart-warming hum of the fans. Feeling *much* better, he fumbled with his handpaws and grabbed the papers, leafed through them quickly, and jammed them back into the folder. With a bounce in his stride, looking from side to side so he could see where he was going, Brian happily walked from the office.

Behind him, Dr Quest just shook his head and pulled up the laptop to check the news on the Hunt for the White Rabbit, who had once been Phil Geusz, as he waited for the next victim.

FELIX WAS WAITING FOR HIM OUTSIDE, luggage stacked beside, sitting in a chair. Pushed himself up, he watched the otter approach. "Brian, can't you take the damn head off for just a few minutes?"

Brian, the otter, shook his head violently, and shivered in horror.

"God—" Felix muttered. "The border's going to be hell you know. At least we didn't fly across. They're going to make you take that off, *all of it off* at the border—"

Brian shook his head violently. Fumbling in the folder, he pulled out his passport, which now included new documentation which labeled his *costume a medical condition* and that it should not be removed unless absolutely necessary. Brian pointed at the wording, jumping up and down happily.

"You warned me there'd be days like this.... Warned me before.... Oh God.... Why did you have to—"

And Brian was there, the papers and folder fluttering to the carpeted floor, holding his best friend in a warm hug, cuddling against him in his warm soft otter fur, willing the fears and anger and sadness to go away.

"You—you know, it is impossible to stay mad at a furry—"

Brian patted Felix on his back, wiggling against him like he was a giant stuffed toy.

"I—" Felix stopped.

Brian had known Felix for more years than he wanted to count, and knew that the crisis was over. He let go, and took a step back, watching through his narrow tunnel vision, moving slightly side to side and turning his head back and forth to get a better view of his surroundings.

"Let's go. We'll cope with this. We'll get back home." Felix snorted and Brian cocked his head curiously. "I wonder what they'll think of this when you get back to the station...."

Brian just shrugged, it bothered him far less than it once would have. He'd survive, and he'd be happy. All bouncy bouncy happy! The only time when he wasn't was when he was out of suit, even just partially. Still, there was something he had to do—

Felix leaned down and began gathering the papers up. "You can help with the luggage, at least, like that, can't you?"

Brian nodded eagerly. Then he stopped. The station! Holding up one finger, he stopped and looked at Felix. There was one thing to do first, now that he was no longer incommunicado. Felix looked curiously, but then

followed as Brian made his way back to their room. It was hard, so *very* hard, but some things just could not be done with the head on. And, for necessities, his suit, his curse, seemed to understand. So, he called work. He hadn't been allowed to directly communicate with them earlier stuck at Xanadu other than to say that he was being held in quarantine by the US government.

The phone rang and rang and Brian itched to get his head back on. He got an answer. Quickly, he said he'd be back, that he had some funny clothes—His manager wouldn't let him finish. Apparently things had changed.

The service station where Brian worked was an independent franchise of one of the big companies. For some reason, the gas bar component of the station had been taken over directly by the big company. New manager and everything. He was told that his working dates would be passed on to the new management and that they'd be waiting for him. Then he was asked if his new clothing requirements would interfere with the job. "Of course not!" Brian replied. "Bye!" Then he hung up and shoved his warm comforting head back on.

Soon he was bouncing down the hall, pushing a luggage cart in front of him, whilst Felix worried.

THE TRIP BACK WASN'T NEARLY as bad as it could be. Felix kept the car's A/C on, and wore a jacket. The only oddity was when Brian was dressed as a greyhound and insisted on rolling down the window and hanging his head out, long felt tongue flapping in the breeze. It was a good thing that most people thought he was just a dog, else there'd have been accidents. They arrived at the border in Buffalo without any problems worse than a few confused late night hotel clerks. The trip had taken longer, but then on the way down the two of them had switched off driving, and Felix refused to push himself too far.

It was about ten in the morning when they drove up to Canadian side of the border. Felix had their documentation ready, and wound down the window. A bored guard started out with, "How long were you gone?"

Felix sighed. "A month."

"And what was—" The guard stared as he saw what was lounging beside Felix.

This time, Brian was wearing a glistening white cervine-based unicorn. The horn was of purple felt wrapped in silver wire, and a flowing white wool mane flowed down his neck and amongst the ears that stretched out to either side of his head. Looking at the guard, he waved.

The guard blinked. Looked at Felix, looked at the waving Brian, and

looked back at Felix, looked at the documentation.... He swallowed. "Umm... he needs to take that off—"

Brian shook his head violently, holding one finger up and shaking it in a *no-no* type sign.

Felix cringed. "He... can't. It's a... a... medical condition."

"I have to insist."

"Sir," Felix said, "if you check his passport, the one that's not mine, there's an attachment. A medical exemption."

The guard looked down, almost thankfully, and saw the notes. Psychological reasons. Or so it said. It didn't matter though, he *had* to see that the face matched the passport. He turned to Brian. "Head off. Now."

Felix cringed more.

Brian shook his head and pointed at the passport the guard was still holding.

The guard, finding refuge in procedure, put the paperwork down. "Head off."

Brian shook his head even more violently, crossing his whitefurred hoofhands over his chest.

"Sir—" Felix began.

"I'm not talking to you!"

"We were at Xanadu—"

The guard stopped. "Oh Jesus—" He backed away, almost as if there were plague carriers in the car. "I really need you to take the head off."

Brian just shook his head more.

"Fine. Out of the car please."

Felix broke in. "Brian, please, just take it off. Not even for a minute. They'll... they'll make you take it *all* off if you don't."

Brian let himself seem to deflate in sadness, his entire body almost collapsing in on itself. With infinite sadness, he reached up, and pulled the unicorn head off, revealing his sweat-plastered human head, naked and alone in the cold.

"Sir," Felix said, "is that— I'm not trying to argue, but, it's the way he was affected. It honestly could hurt him. It's in the papers."

The guard looked down at the passport, and back at Brian. At his look of fear and horror and soul numbing loneliness. "Fine. You may put it—"

Brian had his head happily back on before the guard could complete his statement. The rest of the questions were more perfunctory and then the guard passed them through. Shaking his head, he watched the happy white unicorn waving bye-bye as Felix drove off.

“Why me?” Felix muttered.

FELIX DROPPED BRIAN OFF AT HIS HOUSE late in the afternoon. After helping him carry his luggage inside, he waved and drove off as Brian happily waved back, still costumed as a unicorn.

The house was quiet. His housemate wasn’t back yet. His ficus tree had been watered. The piles of fur and half-completed projects were where he’d left them. Not having much to unpack, what with not needing clothes anymore, he happily clopped over and sat down in front of the computer. Sipping some water from a tube that slipped under the neck of his head, he waited through the bootup sequence.

Then the e-mail download started.

Sighing, he got up, turned the thermostat down a bit, and refilled his mug with cold water from the jug in the fridge and happily clopped back and flopped down. He had to cock his head to see out of one eye as the muzzle of the unicorn head caused cross-eyed vision otherwise.

Finally the mail was downloaded. He had filters in place to direct what should be business e-mail to dedicated folders, but he had learned that far too many people never obeyed instructions in the subject matter. And, spam was omniscient. He looked down at the keyboard and moved to press a key, and saw the clumsy handhooves he was wearing. He had two fingers on the glove, and one thumb, all far bigger than a key. He was torn. Intellectually he *knew* he had to check the e-mail, he had to get things back in order. But, that would mean taking off a hand. At least one, likely both. And that— That—

He remembered seeing people come by the gas station late at night begging for a cigarette. Even a stub. He’d never smoked, he’d never understood it, had tried to help.

Now he knew how they felt.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, looking from hoofhand to keyboard to hoofhand.

He had to do work, he had to buy food. There was no other option.

Blinking back tears of rage and fear he tore off one hand, and then the other, yanking hard enough to tear the clips that kept the fur of the hands from slowly sliding down his arm. Intellectually he knew there was no pain, it was just fur, but it felt – it felt like he was tearing off his hand.

Shivering in fear, in loneliness, he tossed the torn hands onto the floor behind him. Out of sight, out of mind. Then he started deleting the spam, reading what had to be read, and replying to what had to be replied to.

It took him until late in the night. The customers he'd kept informed from Xanadu as best he could, the person who had bought *Stinky Green* hadn't accepted it – he'd been wearing a green tail and the event had made him into *Stinky Green*. At least the client hadn't asked for his money back.

As for others, most understood. If the government won't let you go, there's not much you can do. He'd done what he could design wise, but the projects had lain idle. He couldn't even be specific due to the censorship – just delays with no answer as to how long.

At least he didn't have to work until next week.

Finally, he got it all caught up near midnight, and ran downstairs to the washroom. Thank God he didn't have to strip – he'd made a practice of having the belly zipper long enough that, in an emergency, a wearer could "answer the call" and minimize the risk of ruining a thousand dollar fursuit. Pressure abated, he padded back upstairs, shut off the monitor, and crawled into bed.

He couldn't sleep.

His hands felt so cold and naked. He could put something on, but had nothing complete handy. And he couldn't sleep. His hands weren't on! Finally he got up, found where he'd tossed the hoofhands and happily yanked them on. The magic, the curse, healed the damage he'd done as he relaxed. As stress he hadn't even known he was experiencing had poured out of him.

Feeling much better he skipped over and flopped onto the bed, not bothering with blankets as he was cradled in warm snuggly fur. Curled up into a ball of white fluff, laying on his side, he was soon fast asleep.

THINGS FELL INTO A ROUTINE AFTER THAT, at least for the next few days. He had some frozen casserole left; it was still good. His housemate was in a study. They were friends, but really didn't do much. He saw him once, and waved, and his housemate just shook his head. He'd gotten the e-mail about the curse, but, just like his thoughts on his housemate's hobby and furrydom, he wasn't going to comment.

Showering in the morning was the worst part of Brian's day. To shower he had to get undressed. He had to get *out of suit*. At the hotel he'd had Felix to help. Now, he had to do it himself. He had some pride left, pride in his work, in his body, and in the quality of his suits. That was what got him to do it. It was better to strip, shiver, cry, leap in, soap, rinse, leap out, and then get dressed again without even drying off, than to slowly get the suits dirty and stinky.

After that it was sewing. He had to take off the hands, and it still was a disaster, but he couldn't bear to take off any more. He'd learn. He'd have to learn.

Working all day, he struggled and cursed. He just couldn't see enough, and without his hands on his fingers shook. He'd just have to learn, that was all. It was *far* better to relearn his hard earned skills, rather than learn to work without his head on, without his hands on. At least his curse had *tried* to help, giving him full fingered gloves with very fine fur to wear.

And yet—

Disaster after disaster. He'd learn. He *had* to learn. And he wasn't sad, not really. How can you be said in a soft fuzzy huggable fursuit?

And he had work to carry him over if all else failed. Money would be tight for a while, but, he'd manage.

ON HIS THIRD DAY BACK he finally had to face facts. He needed to go shopping. Water he had lots of from the tap and through a filter. But food, well, he had nothing left he could nuke.

He'd never been out in public, not locally. Not in fursuit anyway, other than Halloween. It was well into December, there'd already been one snow-storm and was threatening another. At least he just had to go a block and across the street. Not as cheap as he could get further away, but convenient and *fresh*.

After his morning shower, he got dressed in a poofy husky fursuit with *very* thick fur. More than warm enough. Grabbing a backpack, he tossed in his wallet, his keys, a scrawled list of necessities, and zipped up the smaller backpack that held all that.

Time to face the world.

Once he wouldn't have dared. He wouldn't have even conceived of the idea. Now, whether it was because of the curse, because of necessity, because he was so *happy* in suit, or just from surviving a month of government scrutiny and mass science-fictional warfare amongst stormtroopers and related costumes that were no longer fake, he had no trouble opening the door and stepping outside.

The first thing he noticed was that he didn't feel cold. Not at all. Then he almost slipped, only grabbing the porch railing kept him from ending up butt down on the stairs. Foot paws weren't the best things for traction—A bit more carefully, he made his way down the two steps, his footpaws sinking into the soft snow.

*Hey, this is pretty good!* he thought. Blowing snow, cold, cold temperatures,

and he was all toasty warm. Even his face was all nice and toasty. Whistling a happy tune, even though it couldn't be heard outside the husky head over the softly humming fans, he happily walked down the snow-strewn sidewalk, kicking puffs up with his footpaws, his empty backpack slung over his shoulder.

All around him, he expected the cars to screech to a halt. People to scream and point, and then to laugh at him rather than with him. Police and news crews to swoop down on parachutes and shove mics in his face and ask him how he could *dare* walk in public dressed as a cartoon.

But, there was none of that. The odd person blinked and looked again, a few waved and he waved back, grinning internally. But, most just went about their business as he went about his.

At least so it *seemed*.

Something *pocked* against his back and he heard laughter.

Once he'd have fled, face red underneath. But now— There were no working blasters in evidence, so what could they do? Stopping, he scratched at one ear, cocked his head—

Another snowball *pocked* onto the ground, and then another one into his side.

Spinning around, he stared, raising his handpaws into mock fists. It was a bunch of teenagers. Given the time, they were probably skipping class. One pointed, and they all laughed.

*Well!* he thought. *That means war!*

With that, he reached down, and gathered up a big ball of snow and scrunched it into a misshapen mass as another enemy weapon *pocked* nearby. It was much bigger than theirs, but not much less dense. He heaved it towards them, and flopped down to take cover and gather more ammo as another ball flew over where he'd been. Kneeling, he heaved his second snowball, this time impacting the kid who'd pointed at him, splashing a huge mound of dirty snow over his victim's chest.

The kid stopped and stared, murder in his eyes.

Brian just pointed and laughed, falling over and splashing into the snow.

As one, *all* the teenagers stared. Brian's laughter was the only sound. Then they all rushed him, grabbed him, and threw him onto and into a snowbank, head first. One grabbed the tail and yanked it off.

Brian just lay there.

What had he done wrong? They'd started it! He'd just done what they'd done.

He could feel his face wet with tears. All around people ignored him.



Finally he staggered up. At least he didn't have to worry about the repairs. The curse would take care of that for him.

Brian fled for home.

Maybe his housemate could run some errands for him.

THE REST OF THE WEEK PASSED. Brian's sewing improved, maybe. Well, not really. He just had to find the proper technique. That was all. Really.

But then, soon, far too soon, Brian had to go back to work.

And he was terrified.

Before Xanadu he'd have changed, done it right. *Never* would he have even thought of going in fursuit. But now – that terror seemed so remote, so simpleminded. But the very idea of *not* going in fursuit—

He almost fainted just at the thought!

At least his curse was helping. Out of the infinite variety of fursuits it could have created, it had tried to be helpful. When he'd gotten dressed, he'd found himself wearing a silly reindeer fursuit, complete with tinkling bells and ivy tangled in the antlers. The handhooves were snug fitting gloves with rubber black tips for grip. He'd have no problem there. There was a nice Christmasy name tag on his chest that said *Brian*. The curse had even come with a little holdable sign that read *what kind of gas* on one side, and *how much* on the other. At least it was Christmasy rather than just furry.

Getting onto the street car was fine. He was dressed. The street car operator hesitated, but he had a valid ticket and he just shook his head to tinkle the happy winter bells. Shrugging, the driver let him on. Inside the street car it was actually a bit warm, but Brian wasn't worried as he would cool off soon. He sucked a bit of water from the thermos in his backpack through a rubber tube, and happily clopped first one foot hoof and then the other as the street car hissed from one stop to another. Reaching his stop, he got off, glad he'd never tried to make proper digitigrade footwear as, from what he'd read, they were almost impossible to walk down stairs in.

Maybe this *would* work. Maybe his shopping trip was an aberration.

He was so *happy*!

There were *many* more people here than when he'd went shopping. But, he was committed now. And, walking amidst all the people was far easier than even *thinking* about taking the fursuit off and working in normal clothes. Children waved, he waved back, his bells tinkled merrily, and he refused the five somebody offered. That was begging, and he wouldn't beg. Though, it did bode well for tips at work. After all, tips were a reward for a job well done. *Definitely* not the same as begging!

He patted his side for the curse had thoughtfully provided a pouch to

store any required objects in. He'd just have to remember to take any change out before getting unsuited, else it would probably vanish to wherever the fursuit went to.

At a happy march, he clopped across the paved lot and into the office, grabbed a pen and some paper, and began taking product inventory. One of the workers from the earlier shift looked at him and stared. Brian waved, cocked his head so the bells tinkled, and pointed to the nametag.

"Brian?"

Brian nodded, and clopped out to begin counting stock, even as the co-worker called out something behind him. Cars piled into the station and he waved as he worked, bells tinkling merrily. Walking up to the first car, he peeked in, head cocked, bells tinkling.

The driver started with, "Fill, reg—" He stopped and stared. Brian waved. The driver still stared.

Brian held up the sign so that the driver saw, *What kind of gas?*

The driver stared.

Brian tapped the sign with a hoof finger.

The driver swallowed. "Reg-regular."

Brian bounced happily, put the sign back against his harness, and opened the gas tank and stuck in the nozzle. Then he moved on to the next car, a black SUV. The driver looked down and smiled, and Brian waved.

"High octane. Forty dollars."

Brian gave a thumbs up and went to work, bells tinkling merrily.

He'd only managed to serve five cars and had gotten an amazing three dollars in tips, when there was a loud voice from behind, so loud that stillness spread out from it, and everything seemed to stop.

"Who the *hell* are you?" It was somebody Brian had never met. The new manager?

Cocking his head, Brian stopped and looked. He could feel his heart thumping. Once, before Xanadu, he'd have snapped to attention and answered. Now.... He tapped the nametag.

"Take that damn head off!"

Brian shook his head vigorously. *What am I doing?* But then, even the thought of taking the head off filled him with cold, icy terror.

By this time a crowd had gathered. Brian looked around, and saw the station owner – the old manager – and waved.

"Brian?" he asked.

Brian nodded vigorously.

"Xanadu?"

Brian jumped up and down, bells tinkling, and nodded even more vigorously.

The new manager shook his head as the drivers watched. People waiting for the bus watched. In the distance impatient drivers honked, not knowing what the hold up was. "Well, take it off. It's not proper uniform."

Inside the head Brian blinked. Technically this guy, the new manager, was right. But— Brian shook his head vigorously.

"It's not safe!"

Brian shrugged. Then he waved, and made his way back into the office and got his pack. Opening the pouch he pulled out the medical papers he'd gotten at Xanadu. The new manager had followed, as did the old, and Brian proudly handed them over. Then he waved at the crowd, bouncing up and down a bit to keep the bells on his harness happily ringing.

The new manager looked up. "It has to come off. The insurance doesn't cover it. You aren't clearly identified as a gas attendant. It's not safe!"

Meanwhile, one of the drivers stuck at the pumps blew his horn.

"Either get proper clothes, or you can't work."

Brian stopped bouncing, and his bells fell to silence. What? But how— What was he *doing*? Yet, it felt *so* right!

The new manager stood his ground. "Change, or you won't work here."

More horns.

"And, you," he pointed at the gas station attendants, "get to work!"

Brian nodded in agreement. The customers came first!

So, why was he here in fursuit causing problems?

But, why couldn't he be here in fursuit?

He felt a hand on his shoulder through the nice warm fake fur and turned his head to see the station owner, his old manager. "Brian, come along."

But—

All around people pushed by, and Brian backed out of their way. The old manager gently tugged and, meekly, Brian let himself be led off as the world dimmed to normality behind him.

THE OLD MANAGER SAT DOWN IN HIS OFFICE and motioned Brian to the other seat. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

Brian struggled to find a way to answer. Finally he shrugged.

"It is Christmasy and all, but—" He sighed. Looking down, he read the documents Brian had gotten at Xanadu. "Psychological, eh?"

Feeling a cold chill, not from the warm fur, Brian nodded.

"So, the... mascot is separate? It *can* be taken off?"

Brian slowly nodded again, and then hung his head.

"But, from what I read here, you couldn't do it. Not and be able to function anyway. You'd go mad."

Brian nodded vigorously!

"You've lost your job, you know that? The new manager.... I don't know. He's been looking for an example. You... you're perfect. Obvious reasons for termination." He sighed. "Hell, I might've.... But it's not my call anymore."

*I'm being fired*, Brian realized.

"Just go home, Brian. Stay there a few—"

*I'm fired! But I've never been fired!*

"—days. Let things cool down—"

*What am I going to do? I can't make fursuits. I can't work anymore. I can't go out—*

Ignoring his old boss, numb with fear and terror and a tangle of other emotions, Brian got up and left. Somehow he made his way home, too full of himself, too full of shock, to notice what anybody said or did.

STANDING IN HIS ROOM, still wearing the reindeer, Brian looked at his first fursuit. It wasn't much. A ratty head that was supposed to be a fox. Bright, almost eye-searing red fur. White highlights. Misshapen and non-symmetrical. Eyes not even and bulging out. A body that he knew would hang over him baggy and loose, except where it pinched.

His very first fursuit. The beginning of a journey.

He would've sworn he felt the warm fur of the reindeer snuggling against him.

Somewhere Brian had read that being fired was one of the most psychological painful things that could happen. More painful even than a close friend's death.

He felt tears staining the already damp inside of the reindeer head. The happiness of being in suit just wasn't enough. It tried, but he was so angry, sad, depressed—

*What was he going to do?*

Brian could live off fursuit making. Maybe. Eventually. But, he had to face facts. A week of effort, and he couldn't see any improvement. None. And then, the snowball ridicule. The stares. The psychological dependency.

No job, no certainty....

Shivering, he pulled off the reindeer head, unzipped the body, took off the hand and foot hooves. He could sense the suit calling to him to put it back on, telling him that it would make everything better. But Brian now understood that this was a lie. With the removal of the last piece, it reverted to the pants he'd put on. He shivered, but from fear, horror, fatigue, or just being naked—

He didn't know any more.

Somehow, a twonie had rolled out of the reindeer pouch and thunked on the floor, making a lonely roll until it clunked against the wall and fell over as the suit reverted.

He shivered. Alone. Unloved.

The world wouldn't accept him. Or, he wouldn't accept the world the way it was.

So many furry dreams. So much happiness. So much hiding from society. And now, now, because of Xanadu, he had no choice.

He started putting on the scratchy ill-fitting fox. His first suit. His oldest suit. As he put each piece on it changed, stretching and twisting until it had become what he had dreamed rather than the ugly reality. He felt himself relaxing as each piece went into place. Body, tail, feet, hands, head—

A dream that the world wasn't ready for.

A dream that Xanadu had ensured he couldn't live without.

Looking at the mirror he saw where the dream started. Where he'd worked so hard to get to the point where he could reproduce it. And now, now the fucking magic had taken away all the craftsmanship! It had taken the reality and twisted it into a private magic that he could never give to others, never share.

He picked up a knife from his workbench. He didn't write a note, didn't e-mail. People would know. People would pity him, beg him, order him—

But bills wouldn't wait. Schedules wouldn't make allowance for whimsy in this world of mundanity.

It didn't take long for the tub to begin filling with hot water. He lowered himself into it, feeling the steaming water ooze through the fake fur and against his skin. The fur snuggled against him, comforting him, offering to give him back the dreams.

Angrily, he shoved the lie away. Tears flowed from his eyes as the water gurgled and bubbled deeper and deeper. He didn't wait. Didn't waste more people's time by making them try and help him. He was cursed. Cursed and doomed.

It took a couple of tries, due to the blurring effects of the tears, before the knife tore through the fur and deep into his flesh. First one wrist, and then the other.

Closing his eyes, Brian fell asleep for the last time as red seeped into the fur, and then stained the water as it overflowed the tub.

## XANADU: FLYING FREE

OF COURSE THE ELEVATOR TOOK FOREVER. I kept checking my watch, glancing at the door, and checking my makeup and face prosthesis in the small mirror beside the elevator. All the while I was tapping the hoof that tipped one of my leg extensions impatiently. Fortunately the rubber of my “flight suit” – it was a wetsuit then – kept my assets from bouncing. *Finally* the elevator dinged, and I ducked and thudded in as the doors slid opened.

“Nice costume!” His voice grew suddenly louder as I turned my head to look at him and the costume ears cupped the sounds and ran it through the electronics. Being a computer support tech gave one lots of contacts for electronics work.

I blushed, but he couldn’t see it behind the makeup. And then I winced at the stench rising from the teenager and filling the elevator. It was so bad I could smell it through my prosthesis which covered my nose! Didn’t teenagers ever *shower* anymore?

“Some kind of horse, I bet!”

I clenched my fists. This was *just* what I needed. At least he couldn’t see me blushing. “I’m an anthropomorphic pegasus,” I stated, through clenched teeth, biting off the urge to apologize for the tiny little white feathered wings. They were the one part of my costume I was not happy with, and I hoped to find a solution here at Xanadu. Being one of the few females involved in anthropomorphic costumes, I dreaded what I *knew* was going to come next. Don’t hit on me, don’t hit on me—

“Whatcha doing for dinner?”

So predictable! Why couldn’t I be stuck with one of the *shy* ones? And, of course, he wasn’t wearing any costume at all.

That was when it happened.

DOWN IN THE MAIN HALL, Eric Winters stood on the main stage. An ancient magic, long suppressed, knew that its moment had come and swept outward across the convention, its power transforming everybody into the costume they wore—

DIZZINESS SWEEPED ACROSS ME, my vision blurred, and I reached down and grabbed the railing in the elevator to keep from stumbling. The dizziness passed quickly and I stood up, steadier and a bit taller, and flicked my ears in annoyance. The stench from the fanboy grew more and more intense, became like a wall of stink, and I snorted—

Snorted?

What the...?

I stomped my hooves in annoyance and shook out my wings—

What was going on?

I stopped, and stared, my range of vision much larger than it'd been before. At either edge I could see my gorgeous massive feathered wings. My gorgeous *black* feathered wings.

I had to get out. Get out. Get out. Get out of this tiny box.

Frantically I punched at buttons.

"You have somebody else waiting, don't you. Fuck!" the fanboy said, but I wasn't listening.

The elevator jerked to a stop and I flexed my wings to keep my balance, cool air hitting my gills, as I fled into the hallway.

I ran down the hallway, wings held partially open for balance, my rubber-shod hooves thumping on the carpet of the narrow tiny *tiny* dim hallway. Strange scents wafted through my nostrils and the hallway seemed to grow smaller and smaller. It ended at a window looking out over a grassy area beside the hotel, and I could see all kinds of mythological and science fictional freaks and madnasses running and screaming. I could hear their sobbing through the window, the tones rising and falling as my ears focused on first one and then the other.

And I was trapped, trapped in this tiny hallway, this narrow shrinking hallway—

I began banging on the glass with my fists, banging and banging as the glass thudded. Tears fell from my eyes, I panted with desperation. I had to get out I had to get out get out get out—

I broke fingers and blood stained the glass that refused to break as I



pounded and pounded. The madness of insane need filling my body as I pounded and pounded. Pounded and pounded before finally collapsing at the bottom of the window, the hallway tiny and cramped and crushing me, my hands dripping blood, sobbing uncontrollably—

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I lay there in a crumpled heap. By the time someone found me, the hall was dim and shadowy. The only light was from the fluorescents overhead.

"Are you all right, Ms...?"

I didn't move until a warm hand touched my shoulder. Then I turned and looked, nostrils flaring, glad for the contact, for *any* contact.

Looking up, my eyes met the concerned face of a female EMT human, dressed all in blue. I snorted, blinked tears from my eyes, and only then did I realize that my hands were all covered in blood, dark and thick and dried on the fine black fur of my palm. I had to be looking like a mess.

"I— What— Who are you?"

"It's all right, I'm not going to hurt you."

I saw movement down the hallway and my view focused on a police officer, or maybe SWAT, in black, carrying a rifle at the ready. My veins pulsed in fear and terror; my wings stretched out and banged painfully against the walls on either side of the tiny hallway. I had to fly – I had to escape – I had to get away! My breath pulsed in and out through my nostrils; I could hear my heart beating in a buzz in my ears.

"I want to help you," the lady said.

The rich odor of manure overwhelmed my nostrils and I knew I'd voided myself. Online I'd joked about voiding myself, like a bird, before taking to the air and fleeing. Evidently that had carried over too.

There was no room, no room! The walls were—

I swallowed, dry, my breath whirring in and out through my nostrils. Looking past her, through her blurred form, eyes wide, all my vision focused on the man with the gun down the hallway. My ears twitched and focused on a fading thump and then a needle pricked my shoulder.

Screaming, I leapt up, trying to grab the air, wings banging against the wall. The woman backed away and then I quieted, the world spun, and I slumped to the ground.

I WOKE UP IN MY HOTEL ROOM to the morning sun streaming through the window. They must have gotten the room number from the key I was carrying in one of belt pouches. I was in my bed, lying on my stomach, and

I had to go! Still half asleep, with every muscle aching, I yawned and got out of bed and stumbled upright – and felt my wings touch the ceiling.

I just stopped and turned my head, and stared at the soft black feathers.

I spun for the window; the world shrinking. My eyes wide open; my mind desperate to get outside—

Then I felt liquid oozing down my legs inside the wetsuit. That shocked me to sanity. I hadn't – not for years! Not since I was five!

I slapped myself, hard. Whether or not this was a dream, this was *me*, and I had to live with it for now. Whining and sobbing and denial wouldn't achieve anything!

Angry, I stomped over to the mirror, nostrils cringing at the scent of urine escaping from around my legs. I could feel my ears turning beet red; I could feel my muscles trembling. I could feel my wings opening a bit and then closing again and again. I could feel the movement of each feather as air brushed against it.

Looking in the mirror, I saw myself. My *new* self. I was pleased to see that I didn't look much different than when I'd been in costume, except for the wings of course. Gently I ran a hand along the side of my muzzle and felt the satiny ebony fur.

This was *me*.

I hadn't wanted this... hadn't I?

But then why was *this* the fursuit, the costume, I'd made?

I was still female, though not as obviously. My breasts were smaller than they'd been, supported by the massive pectoral muscles wrapped around my chest below them. I looked at the hard corded muscles that joined my wings to my keel so that I could fly.

Could I fly? I fought down the urge to escape this prison. It was a bit easier than before.

I shivered, feeling the cooling liquid inside my flight suit – I couldn't believe I'd done that! I needed to shower. And had I *voided* myself? It was a dim memory – and then I could feel it inside the flight suit. Disgusting!

My ears turned redder than before.

First thing was to get the wetsuit, the flight suit, off. It didn't look quite the same – it looked softer, more like what I'd imagined a high tech anthropegasus flight suit would look like. I felt around with my hands for the zipper, and found nothing.

How was I supposed to get this off? Think, girl!

The zippers had gone. Okay. Fine. It looked more like what I'd imagine.

Okay. Fine. Run with that. I'd imagined the flight suit not having seams for better aerodynamic effects. In IRC roleplay I'd taken it off by... by pressing a seam that went down from my neck along my spine, and then split to each side to the slots for my wings. Then I would unpeel it.

Still breathing quickly, my ears still hot from embarrassment, I reached back to my neck and felt around. Nothing. Fine, assume it's there. I pressed down with a fingernail and ran it down. I could feel the material loosening. Tracing the left seam along to my wing, I stopped when my fingers touched the fine feathers at the base. My feathers—

I could feel a duality – my fingers touching the soft down, and the soft down pulling on the sensitive skin it grew out of. I almost wanted to pet myself.

No!

Angrily I traced the seam along the other side and felt it loosen. I forced myself to ignore the touch against the feathers of my right wing. Pulling the two flaps of the flight suit over my shoulders released the – no, *my* compressed mane that I could feel going down along my spine. It'd been there in my mind before, but now it was real.

One thing at a time, girl.

I stopped and felt the soft rubbery material of my flight suit. It was *not* the foam rubber it'd been. It was far softer, almost spongelike. Just like what I'd imagined. Whatever had transformed me, if I was transformed and not insane, had been *very* thorough.

I identified more new sensations, and I realized that I was starving. That, at least, made perfect sense, as I'd imagined that I'd have a *very* rapid metabolism to allow flight. Somehow – scent I think – I *knew* there was nothing edible in the room.

The candy in the pouch!

Leaving the suit loose I looked down, cocking my head to see around my muzzle, and reached down to the right pouch. Somehow I knew that there was a circle of three triangles of stiff rubber that I could press my hand through. Instead I undid the clasp and opened the lid.

There were no candies inside. Instead it was full of what looked like large red balls, but I knew they were soft and easily chewable. My stomach gave me no choice and I shoved it into my eager muzzle. If these were what I'd imagined, then they were a high energy concentrate. Horrible taste, dangerous to use in quantity, but perfect for short term energy replacement.

Like I said, I'd thought *far* too much about what I was pretending to be. No, far too much about what I'd *become*.

The candy *did* taste horrible. It melted in my mouth into an oily gel that almost wiggled its own way down my throat. I felt better, but popped one more just to be safe. I was starving!

My stomach wasn't happy, but I felt a lot better, and I felt a lot more alert.

I sealed the pouch and then opened the other one – the one that had my ID and key – and found it empty. If it was empty, then why was the concentrate still here? I couldn't think of a reason.

I undid the belt – it had the same kind of pressure release as the flight suit did – and put it on the dresser top, and then unpeeled the flight suit down my arms and pulled them out, and then rolled it down my body, all the time marvelling at the soft spongy warm texture. Stepping out of it, I tossed it onto the bed. I couldn't help but turn away from the stench of the urine and manure I'd left on the inside of the suit, my nostrils wrinkling in distaste.

That was when I noticed the typed letter taped to the corner of the mirror:

*Ms Reynolds,*

*I'm sorry that we tranquilized you, but we didn't know if you were still sound of mind. Other victims of the Xanadu Event have forgotten who they were – we hope you haven't. If you do not know the name "Ms Reynolds" then we apologize.*

*When you're ready, call 888 on your room's phone and somebody will respond soonest.*

*We apologize for this, but we don't know how violent you are, or what your capabilities are. You're locked in your room for your protection, not anything else. When we can talk, we'll explain more.*

*Don't panic. We're here to help you.*

I just stared and read the note again. Not know my name? Not sound of mind? Forgotten who I am? It made no sense! But then, none of this did.

I looked at the phone and thought about dialing, but the scent wouldn't let me think of anything other than getting clean. Turning around I thudded over to the tiny bathroom and ducked through the door, and looked at the small linoleum tub.

Crap. The shower head was nowhere near high enough and there was no mat of any kind in the bottom.

I stretched out my foot and watched my pastern straighten out. Originally

it had been surgical tubing and hinges, now it was flesh and blood. One wonders about these things, but then the reality comes....

I let my foot – hoof – thud to the floor.

Shower. I had to shower. I was a *mess*! But I also didn't want to slip and fall. I had enough troubles.

Looking around, the only thing I could see were the towels the hotel had provided, and I tossed the largest onto the bottom of the tub. At least it was something. I turned the shower on and *carefully*, with a secure grasp on the curtain rod where it contacted the wall, ducked and stepped into the tub.

I could feel the wet towel shift a little, could feel a hint of the texture distantly on the bottom, the frog, of my hooves. I washed myself, after first setting the showerhead to pulse and letting it beat against my sore wing muscles.

It took a lot of ducking and crouching, and a lot of banging of wings and limbs against the wall, and most of a bar of soap. The bathtub was so *tiny*! Finally I was clean. I could see that there was some kind of salve on my palms, but they were pretty well healed. The gills beneath my wing stayed tightly shut – I cleaned around them carefully, afraid to try and pull them open.

And my wings... my wings didn't like it. Washing them felt wrong. The feathers actually repelled the water and I watched beads form along the feather surfaces. Angrily I scrubbed along the feathers until they were soaked and drooping.

But clean.

I scrubbed and I scrubbed until all I could smell was the soap. It stung, not my eyes as I felt my inner eyelid close and keep the soap out, but my wounds, and its chemical stench stung my nostrils. It didn't matter, as I would *not* go and see whomever it was who'd left the note stinking of shit and urine.

When I *finally* felt clean I shut off the water and started grabbing towels to dry my soaking fur and feathers. Water dripped off me, tinkling into the tub and plunking onto the linoleum floor from my wing tips.

With one towel after another I scrubbed against my fur and stroked along my feathers, drying myself off. There were nowhere near enough.

Sighing, I stepped out, and the wet rubber of my horseshoe slid out from underfoot— hoof, and I slammed backward against the wall. My wings slammed painfully against the plaster and I screamed and I slid partially down before I grabbed the curtain rod, almost yanking it out of the wall.

Fine! I'd practiced enough, I had a sense of balance, and the actual room was carpeted. This was my new body and I'd master it! I'd practiced enough.

Blinking tears of rage and frustration from my eyes, I gingerly, carefully, got my other hoof out and onto the tile, and from there I made little baby steps over to the carpet, to secure footing— hoofing. Then I grabbed my hairdryer, which was still on the little counter beside the sink where I'd left it, turned it on, and started drying myself.

I don't know how long it took. I was hot, angry; pain from my wings, my wing shoulders, one leg, pulsed through me. My fur was a mess, all tangled. I tried my brush, but it was useless. Angrily I dragged it along my mane, along my hide, along my tail. It was all I had and I *refused* to look a mess. My feathers were ruffled and disordered, though I was able to run my fingers, and my long nails, through them to groom them into order. *That* I'd also worked out during roleplay sessions.

Still slightly damp, I stomped out, almost banged my head on the lintel, and yanked open the drawer and looked at my clothes – and stared.

Blouses? I had wings! They wouldn't fit anymore. I hadn't brought any dresses – I'd planned on going to the dance in costume.

My vision blurred with tears and my lips trembled. Why had this happened? *Why?*

Angrily I grabbed something, a blouse, and wiped my eyes, and then threw it against the window. I needed to be outside. I—

Not now! God, *why?*

I fell to my knees – were they even *knees* anymore? – and banged my fists on the dresser top again and again and again. I leaned forward and held my head, my *muzzle*, in my hands and sobbed, each one wracking my body, shaking my wings.

My goddamned wings!

The sun was high in the sky by the time I'd gotten it out of my system. I was stiff, my stomach was growling, my muscles were sore, my mane and tail not quite a tangled mess. At least I was pretty well dry.

Angrily I shoved myself back up onto my fee— hooves and glared at myself. At my red, bloodshot eyes, my tangled cheek— fur— hide—

Yanking the drawer out until the catches inside banged against the frame, I started grabbing and tossing the useless crap across the room. I hadn't brought much – a few blouses, some pants, a skirt, stockings, bras.... I tried putting the first bra on but it was tight, the straps pinched my wings, and the cups hung loose and flaccid over my tiny breasts that peeked out above my pectoral muscles.

I whipped the bra against the window with a thump. What was I going to wear? *What would fit?* The skirt, at least would work. I grabbed one of my longer panties—

But what about my chest? I would *not* go topless! By God I was a *sophant*, not a whore!

The only thing I could think of that *might* work was the one piece bathing suit I'd brought. I swam each morning for exercise so that my fursuit would fit right, but now.... Angrily, I rummaged around and yanked it out, scattering panties and stockings over the floor, and looked at it. It was black, but that was fine. I'd always liked black against my white skin. A nice contrast—

I looked down at my black hide and snorted. Well, now it matched.

I stepped into it and yanked the stretchy lycra up my long legs, painfully tight against my crotch, and shoved my arms under the shoulder straps. Thank *God* it had a low enough cut in the back to leave room for my wings. Then I grabbed the one skirt, thankfully it was a long one, and stepped into it and yanked it up and around my waist, snapping the elastic to make sure it was tight.

It still went to my ankles, or was that my fetlocks now – *I didn't know!* – and there was still a good foot between the hem and the floor. And it didn't go with black – *of course not!*

My stomach growled again.

I spun around, the bathing suit tugging painfully at the tangled fur of my hide, the skirt shishing around my legs, and clomped over to the phone.

Room service, room service.... Lifting the phone up I yanked out the hotel directory and slammed the phone back down with a clang. Food delivery, food delivery.... Ah! 322. I dialed it, my stomach growling again.

And got a rapid busy beeping. What the—

I slammed the headset down, yanked it up, and dialed again. Same stupid thing. Slamming it down with a bang and a clang I grabbed the directory. Room service, front desk, information.... I tried them all and every last one was the *same thing!* My vision narrowed and I reached down to yank out the phone and whip it across the forsaken hellish room—

The note. The damned note!

Throwing the phone down on the table with a crash and a rattle, I clomped over to the mirror, tossed a pair of pantyhose across the room, and ripped the note off. Number, number.... Call 888—

Crumpling the note and throwing it away I clomped back, picked the phone up and dialed 888.

Normal busy signal. Breathe, girl.

I dialed again. Busy signal. Again. Busy signal. Again – and it rang. *Thank God it rang!*

And rang. And rang—

The phone was awkward in my hands, pressed painfully against my ear as I held the mouthpiece away from my chin hoping I could speak into it.

*Answer, goddamnit!* It kept ringing—

Someone answered: “I’m sorry, but we’re really busy—”

*“What the fuck is going on?”*

“I’m sorry, Ms... Reynolds. We’re really busy – someone’ll get back to you as soon as they can.” Click.

I screamed, a loud shrill horse scream. My stomach growled angrily. I was hungry, thirsty, *damned* hungry! I dialed 888 again, and got a rapid busy tone.

Shit! How could I have been so *stupid*?

I dialed again, and it rang and rang... but not as much as before.

*“We’re really busy, I can’t—”*

*“I need some food! I’m starving!”*

*“I’m sorry—”*

*“You don’t understand! I need food!”*

*“I’m sorry, but – need?”*

Years of tech support and dealing with idiot customers enabled me to force a semblance of calm. “I need food. To eat. For this body—”

“Ma’am— Ms Reynolds.... I’ll get something up, but it’ll take a while. Breads, buns—”

Idiots! I flew and that meant I needed to be able to process high energy foods – and grass was *not* high energy. “I need meat. Lots of meat.” My stomach was a raging agony. “And... grains. And bread. Just – lots of it!”

“Ms Reynolds, I’ll see what I can do.” The voice was nervous, turning angry. “You’ll just have to hold on.”

I just collapsed on the bed, unable to stand anymore, eyes wet. The rage had burned itself out. She was just an angry customer. Don’t let her get to you. “I’m... sorry. But I really need something. I really do. Just... just do what you can? Please?”

“Ms Reynolds, ma’am, we’re doing the best we can, but nothing like this has ever happened. I’ll try to get them to rush it. That’s all I can promise.”

“Thank – thank you. That’s.... That’ll have to do. I’m sorry. It’s been a trying day.”

“It has for all of us. I’ll get the food up as fast as I can. Now I need you to free up this line; other victims need help too.”

“I’m sorry. Thank you. Thank you very much.”



"No problem, Ms Reynolds. Good bye."

There was a click and the line went dead. I let the headset fall out of my hand and slide along my skirt and thump to the floor.

It seemed I wasn't sobbed out yet and fell on the bed, hugged my old and worn stuffed horse tight against me, and lost it again.

A WONDROUS ODOUR OF HOT MEAT, grains, *food*, massaged my nostrils and I looked up, blinking tears out of my eyes. The door was opening and a hotel orderly was pushing in a cart. Thank *God*!

My wings flapped to help me onto my fee— hooves and I ran – galloped over.

His eyes widened. He shoved the cart forward and then fled. The door thudded shut behind him. I was barely able to pull the cart over and sit down on the bed before I yanked off the plastic covers. Somehow I managed not to throw them away before I grabbed the fork and knife and dug in!

Oh *God*, it was good. Sure, it was hotel food, badly cooked hotel food, but my need made it like ambrosia. Before I knew it I'd finished off the two hamburgers, gulped down the soup, and eaten every slice of bread and every bun. I didn't even stop to butter them.

My stomach was finally happy.

Calmer now, almost sane, I looked around. Looked around at the scattered bedclothes... at my clothes tossed everywhere... at the wet spots on the floor... at the damp trails from the cart wheels from where they'd rolled across the still wet carpet in front of the washroom.

Why had this happened to me?

I got up to try and do some cleaning when there was a knock at the door.

"Ms Reynolds?" a male voice called out. "I can come back...."

My ears focused on the voice.

"If you're still eating I can wait...."

Did I want to see anybody? I checked myself in the mirror – I didn't look too bad, and there was nothing readily available to make me look better. "Come in, I'm done!"

There was a tink of a key and the door opened. A man stepped in, neat and impeccably groomed. He was dressed in a strict professional suit, but it was rumpled, and there was a stain on it of something. I sniffed – cat?

He closed the door and I heard the turning of a key from outside.

"Ms Reynolds? I'm Dr Archibald Cummings." With that he opened a binder that had been under his arm and flipped through papers. "Let's see

now. Ms Angela Reynolds, age twenty-eight, found in the east hallway third floor in near psychotic state.... EMT talked to, subject panicked, tranquilized. Extreme bruising and abrasions to both hands; wounds cleaned, medicated with.... Subject not thought violent or excessively dangerous, taken to room, left to recover. Hysteric on phone, but....”

I could smell him almost clearer than I could see him. He was tired, flustered, nervous, a little afraid. How did I know all that? Was it *all* from scent? “Mister – um, Doctor Cummings? What the.... What’s going on?”

He calmly turned a page, and then looked up and adjusted his glasses. He pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket beneath his jacket and clicked it open. “You really don’t know?”

“Don’t know what? I was in the elevator and then I became... became this!”

“How would you know?” he muttered, and then he explained. Explained how everybody in the convention centre, in the grounds around the convention centre, in the hotel, they’d *all* become their costume. There were superheroes, Klingons, aliens, villains, monsters....

Two days ago I’d never have believed him. But with what had happened to me....

Some had lost their minds and forgotten who they were – had become who they were dressed as with no memory of what they’d been. Some could perform *magic*—

Dear God—

“I’m sorry, really sorry, for not getting back to you, but we’re overwhelmed. Nothing like this has ever happened.”

Of course not.

“I hope you understand, but I need to ask you some things. Get some baseline data.”

Of course he did. He needed to know what I’d done. What I was. This time *I* was the brainless customer who’d screwed up their OS. “Sure, sure. Ask away....”

He started with the simple questions: my name, my age, what I remembered. He seemed quite relieved that I recalled everything seamlessly. Given what he’d described, I was kinda relieved too.

“Now, Ms Reynolds, I need details of what you’ve become.”

Starting slow, ears blushing, I told him everything I could recall. I knew why he needed to know. Get a baseline, get all the details of the problem and then try and solve it. So I started telling him everything I’d imagined—

“Why, Ms Reynolds?”

I blinked at him and my stomach rumbled.

“Why this form?”

“Why? I.... I’d helped friends with their fursuits, costumes, for years, but I’d never done one of my own.”

“Why this one? Why this horse—”

“Not a horse. An anthropomorphic pegasus. You know the myth? Pegasus and Bellerophon?”

“No.”

“Pegasus was a winged horse—”

“I know that!”

“Anthropomorphic means human—”

“I know *that* now too you goddamned wack—” He coughed. “I’m sorry, Ms Reynolds. That was totally uncalled for. It’s just been a very long day.”

I swallowed, wishing I had a glass of water. “That’s... that’s all right.”

“I do need to know why, though. I need to get a psychological model of you. Some of the people have psyches completely alien to anything I’ve seen. They sound normal, but then they say things with absolute conviction—” He shook his head and smiled, slightly. “You’re far more normal than a lot of them.”

I earblushed. “Thank you. Why? You know, I’m not really sure why. Why this? I’ve helped friends with their fursuits—”

“You already said that.”

“Oh, right. But anyway, I’ve never done one of my own. Never had any interest.”

“Why now?”

“Why? A friend pointed out the website of this company that made high end prosthetics, all kinds of animals. I browsed the site, curious, and then I saw a horse muzzle and it all... it all clicked.”

“You’ve never been interested in horses before then?”

“No. Well, when I was young I read all the horse books I could get. No, not the pulp novels they grind out, the older ones. Brighty, Black Beauty, Justin Morgan. They fascinated me. My parents thought it was the typical little girl horse fascination and maybe it was, but it always stuck with me. I grew up, read other things, lots of sci-fi, a bit of fantasy... but certain books stood out, grabbed me more than others. Dun Lady’s Jess – always horses. You know, it’s funny, I never really realized this before....”

“Uh huh.” His pen scratched as he jotted things down.

“In my mind I’d played for years with how to create something that would simulate a digitigrade stance – like a horse – walking on one’s toes. It just seemed like an interesting puzzle to me. Then, once I saw the muzzle, I started looking into it seriously. Somebody I knew pointed me to a Yahoo

group and I found a bunch of possibilities and chose one. Maybe the most extreme one, but—

“You didn’t like your human body?”

“Didn’t like?” I’d ran across a bunch of people like that. “No, no, nothing like that. I was happy with my life. Well, mostly. I think I just dreamed and... well, wondered.”

“Just wondered?”

“Wondered what it’d be like. To be a horse. To sniff the air, to run on hooves, that kind of thing.”

“Why not a full horse then?”

“Because I think civilization is a *good thing*. I like hands. I like technology. I saw no reason to give those up.”

“Oh, that’s... good. So why not an – ah – anthropomorphic horse?”

“I started working on that, but nothing would jell. I had the hoof extensions working and could walk in them easily. I had the prosthesis painted, but it didn’t grab me. I had no... soul to go with the concept. Nothing to drive it. Lots of bits and pieces but with nothing to unify it.”

“What happened?”

“In an online chat, IRC, somebody gave me a set of wings—”

“Huh? Gave you?”

“No, not in reality. In a roleplay – an imaginary story we created.”

“Ah! Some of the others mentioned that.”

“So Arrow – that was the man’s nickname – gave me the wings and I put them on and, well, I flew. And that was what I needed. Suddenly everything clicked together. A whole individual form. Ideas flowed through me, how it could work—”

“And where’d the fish come in?”

I stopped and snorted and stared at him. “Fish?”

“The...” he looked down, “gills. The EMT that examined you found some kind of gills under your arms....”

“Oh, those. Nothing to do with water. Ever hear of the Ythri?”

“No.”

“They’re a race of sophants created by Poul—”

“Sophants?”

“It’s a term created by the author Poul Anderson as a collective term for any tool making race.”

“Oh.” He nodded and scribbled something down.

“The Ythri are a sophant race: human sized, capable of flight, and native to a Terran-normal.... Earth-like environment. There’s a rumour that he created the Ythri on a dare from another writer to create a human-sized

flyer that could be believably capable of flight. The gill slits act as a kind of supercharger. With each downstroke of the wing, the gills open and the air flows through them supercharging the blood with oxygen.”

“Oh.”

I could tell he didn’t understand. Idiot. “There’s other things too. An extremely fast metabolism to support the high muscle activity – it’s why I needed the food so badly. Hollow bones – my mane on my head is a kinda punk haircut for aerodynamic reasons, not looks. It acts like a rudder. Then there’s nictating eyelids to keep the dust particles out during flight. I think that’s most of it.” It wasn’t, but some things I wasn’t sure of and a part of me was suspicious enough to keep my thoughts to myself.

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else that I’d thought of. Who *knows* what else has happened to me.”

“And why the rubber?”

“The rubber?”

“The suit you were wearing. They thought it was rubber, but they couldn’t figure out how to get it off.” He blushed and looked away. “Some of the victims had, um... fetishes—”

I laughed, a loud nasal braying laugh. He looked at me, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “Nothing like that! I came up with it as an aerodynamically superior flight suit. It’s made up of a soft rubber-like compound, but far tougher. I imagined it as some kind of expanded carbon foam—”

“Um...?”

“I don’t know the details. I just had ideas.”

“But, so much—”

“Waiting for the next moron – customer – gives one a lot of time to think.”

“Oh. Go on then.”

“I imagined it was kinda like dolphin skin – supposedly their skin feels like warm rubber – but for air instead of water.”

“Oh. I’d guess that’d explain the watch we found on you.”

“Where is it anyway?”

“They took it – didn’t know if it was a bomb or a weapon or what. Hell, there’re Stormtroopers with working *blasters* for heaven’s sake.”

“Oh—”

“They couldn’t open it, but it had all kinds of things.” He flipped a page and looked down. “Digital watch, altimeter, magnetic compass, something called an inertial compass—”

“You zero that, and it keeps track of your movement – direction and

speed – from that point on, so that you can go back to where you started from.”

“Oh. Apparently it even had an FAA identification transponder—”

“It generates a unique ID for an aircraft, or in this case anthro-pegasus, for air traffic controllers.”

He nodded. “The ID wasn’t in the national database, and it had an unusual prefix.” I bet it did, given what it was ID-ing. “But it was compatible with the existing system. And, let’s see.... I need to ask you about those pills in your one pouch. They couldn’t figure out how to get the belt off, or the flight suit, and the pouch kept refilling.”

Refilling?

“They took some for analysis and it was a complex sugar—”

“Remember what I said about having a high metabolism? Those are an emergency high energy supplement. Sugars and stuff to feed my metabolism so I don’t over-extend myself.”

“I’ll pass that on with the sample. But why was the pouch always full?”

“I.... Honestly, I don’t know. They were just there in case I needed them.”

“Just there? *Always* just there?”

“I guess.... Maybe?”

“Thank you for that information, Ms Reynolds, but there’s one more thing. How did you get out of that... um... flight suit of yours? Nobody could figure out how.”

“It’s got a molecular-bound seam. You have to press hard at the back of the neck and along the seam to open it if closed, to seal it if open. Same with the belt. It was the best I could come up with to avoid zippers screwing up the air flow.”

“Uh huh.” He scribbled a bunch of stuff and I waited, tapping a hoof back and forth. Finally he finished. “Well, thank you very much then Ms Reynolds. I’ll pass this on and somebody will get back to you—”

“You’re going to leave me? For how long?”

“It shouldn’t be long. You don’t seem dangerous but we need the results of blood tests – they took samples while you were unconscious – and analysis of those pills....”

I sighed and looked out the window. A few days. “Can I have my ID back, and the watch?”

“They’ll be returned to you, I assure you. Now, I need to be going—” He started getting up.

“Wait! Can I get some other things?”

“What kind of things?”

"A brush, I guess. A horse brush. I...." I earblushed. "I really need it. And I need lots of food, two or three times a day."

He jotted some stuff down. "Just a normal meal?"

I remembered the big mass of food. "What I had earlier."

He just looked at me, sighed, and then wrote something down. "The food is fine; it's on the government. I'll see about the brush. There're veterinarians around; one of those should have one, and there'll be one up to examine you at some point—"

"Veterinarian?"

"Um.... You do look more horse than human, you know."

"Oh."

"And I need to take that flight suit, and the belt and the pouch with me. For analysis."

"Wait a minute! What'll I wear?"

"They'll be returned, I promise. We just need to check.... To try to understand."

I nodded. "You sure I'll get them back?"

"Absolutely."

I looked at my flight suit, and wrinkled my nostrils at the stench. I should have rinsed it. "Can you get me some clothes then? Some skirts? Almost nothing fits anymore."

"I'll see what I can do. Somebody will call. Get your size and all that."

"Okay."

"The TV is fully activated. This'll be over soon. I promise."

"Soon.... Okay then. Thanks. And...."

He looked at me.

"Just... thanks."

"No problem." He grabbed my flight suit, the pouch, turned and knocked on the door and called out his name. The key clicked, and the door opened, and he went out. The door was locked behind him.

For a while I just stared at the door, sitting on the bed and rocking my hooves back and forth on the floor. Part of me wondered why the terminology was becoming so easy to me; I hadn't created a fursona, a personality, but I had created a race. And concepts.... How much was that inside me?

And there was more. A really scary more. I'd never gotten around to deciding how long this fictional race lived. A part of me had always wanted to live forever, to visit the stars, to see where humankind went. I shivered as I wondered if *that* wish had been copied over.... Or maybe I'd have the lifespan of a horse, twenty years or so, or even shorter due to my hyper metabolism. I had no clue.

I looked at the door again.

I had no clue what I really was. The government had taken everything they could from me. I knew people who'd be mad as hell *knowing* that the government was about to screw them. I couldn't believe that... but then why hadn't I shared my speculations as to life span?

I swallowed as my stomach growled. They were just being cautious. Really, they were....

I WAS STUCK IN XANADU, me and a whole bunch of others, for a month. Our guards weren't mean or anything, but they were cautious. I guess I couldn't blame them. The next day they unlocked my door as I'd proven to them that I was in control and wasn't dangerous. I could move through the hotel, but not go out, and not call out. I managed to at least get them to call my workplace and tell them I'd be absent an unknown amount of time due to "government quarantine". *Once* I was allowed to call my parents. Talking to them wasn't easy – I couldn't speak at first, nor could they. I reassured them that I was fine, and sane – I'd been told I couldn't say any more than that – and that I'd be home when I could. They promised to pass it on to the few close friends I had. As some of those went to the same chat groups I did, word would get around.

There were a bunch of us, but not as many as I'd expected. Some SF characters without their hardware – none of the aliens. A bunch of fantasy characters, and a bunch of furies. We met for meals, but not really much else – I think everybody was still shell shocked.

We went through tests, had veterinarians look at most of us. I got long lectures on important things I'd never known before like hoofcare. Though I'd always been fascinated by horses, I'd never really ridden one, and had *never* cared for one. It was enlightening. He managed to get me a pair of "hoofboots". He also gave me a horse brush, and for that he was my friend forever. And then he and an MD gave me a medical examination. The doctor couldn't find my heartbeat and first blamed his equipment – until he and I realized that the regular buzz he was hearing *was* my heartbeat. Hummingbirds had nothing on me. Of course, there is some evidence that lifespan is a fixed number of heartbeats, and *that* didn't make me any happier.

I also found that my new weight was barely eighty pounds. *That* was kinda frightening – they had no idea how that was even possible, and I declined their request for X-rays and surgical examinations as I was afraid of what they'd find. Besides, I told them, if there was something wrong with the physiognomy I'd created for myself, I'd already be dead.



One thing I learned, in addition to my prodigious appetite, was that I couldn't sit still. After introductions between me and the other inmates, there wasn't much to do other than watch TV and read. I *could* do those, but I couldn't stand still whilst doing so. Always I ended up pacing, or rocking back and forth, or just tapping a hoof. It was almost embarrassing as I almost never realized I was doing it until somebody in a room below me started banging on their ceiling.

The government refused to return my flight suit – said it was being studied by “top men”. Same for the stimulant and my watch – whatever it'd become. And I wasn't the only one. Most of the remaining guests had had any high tech stuff their costumes had been equipped with confiscated. There were rumours that a lot of it refused to work for anyone other than the owner. I didn't know what to think.

They'd even confiscated the sewing kit that I'd brought in case I needed to make repairs to my fursuit, unlikely given the lack of cloth involved in it. They'd been afraid I might use the pointed needles to hurt myself or others. Guess I couldn't blame them. I managed to get the kit back and began modifying my clothes so I'd have something that would fit me other than the damned bathing suit. I couldn't get anything to not drag and pull painfully at my fur, but I modified my blouse and my two tee-shirts so that they were wearable. A number of the others had similar problems and I ended up helping them out too. To my surprise, a lot of people at Xanadu didn't really need my help. Or anyone else's, not when it came to clothes as theirs would change to fit as soon as they put something on. I saw a medieval swashbuckler fox trying to put on a twentieth-century shirt and have it swiftly morph into a frilly Renaissance shirt. Lucky bastard.

Regardless, I needed this month of rest; I needed this time to come to terms with myself. My *new* self. I only lost it twice, once sobbing on the floor, and another time banging my fists futilely against my window. At least my metabolism let me heal fast. Time passed and I got more and more antsy and nervous – I needed to get outside. I spent more and more time in the larger conference and ballrooms on the main floor which kept me somewhat sane.

I was really glad I'd missed the awards ceremony – that was when the event happened. All the people becoming their costumes.... If I'd been in the middle of that, if my claustrophobia had kicked in, I could have killed people with my wings. Or, at least I figured I could have. I'd heard about swan wings being able to snap limbs. Mine were bigger and my muscles were *far* stronger.

Time passed. Contrary to some of the stories you've heard, the

government was actually quite helpful – changing identities was one of the earliest things they did, and that percolated through the system, IRS first. They kept us fed – which for me couldn't be cheap – and put us up in the hotel free. Probably they had to as they wouldn't let us leave.

Towards the end of the month they started letting people go. The more normal ones first. I'd found out that the really minorly changed ones – those who'd been wearing nothing but animal ears or a tail – had been let go while I was still in my room. Of course, a lot of people had left in the first few hours of confusion – mostly the more powerful ones. There were stories on the news, rumours. Superheroes fighting crime and fighting supervillains. I remember watching a discussion on CNN after a battle in New York that caused an estimated one-point-three-billion dollars worth of damage.

Anyway, just before I was let go, I was taken to see a Dr Sands – who looked just like Dr Quest! The original, not the new crap knock off. Boy, was he *handsome*! I kept calling him Dr Quest even after he admitted the truth.

"Yes, Ms Reynolds, I was a guest at Xanadu, and as you've surmised, I came dressed as Dr Quest. I still miss my son, even though I know intellectually that he's never existed."

"Holy crap!" I responded. "I.... I don't know what to say."

"No matter. What's done is done. Now you're likely wondering why I'm talking to you—"

I snorted and started rhythmically thunking a hoof against the front of the desk he was sitting at.

He raised an eyebrow and stated simply, "I know that you have issues with hyperactivity due to your unusual metabolism, but it would be easier to talk if you kicked something else."

Ears blushing furiously, I stopped, and rocked my hooves alternately back and forth on the floor.

Dr Quest... Sands... opened a binder. "The government has interviewed me and I've agreed to their request to create a special task force and think tank to deal with the Xanadu Effect. We provide a home to those whose physical requirements would make resuming a normal life awkward, and provide special facilities to those who need them. We study the equipment, monitor the more dangerous or exceptional individuals, and have special operatives that can be sent to troublespots when needed. Troublespots that conventional authorities are unable to deal with."

"I don't think I need any special treatment." I looked out the window from my side vision, felt the outside calling me, and forced down a panic attack.

"If you're certain you can handle it. Based an analysis of your dental work, and your diet, it seems that you can eat whatever a human can, so that will make your life easier, though it might be expensive."

I was a tech support specialist and floor sales manager at one of the giant computer store chains – money was not that much of an issue for me. "I'll be fine."

"Records of your income suggested that, but I had to ask just in case."

I scratched at my side – damn clothes pulling on my fur. "Why do you want me then? And, do I really have a choice?"

"Ms Reynolds, of course you do. This is the United States of America."

"Then where is my property?"

Dr Sands frowned and I could smell a bit of embarrassment on him. Somehow I'd had no trouble identifying the meaning of new scents – possibly because I'd put so much thought into how this form would work. "I'm sorry, Ms Reynolds, I have it here with me. We kept your watch, but created a new one for you with conventional technology. And, we removed a very small piece of your flight suit for analysis. An amazing material actually—"

My stomach grumbled. "And the stimulant?"

"That? They didn't want to give that back, they called it a dangerous poison. I had to point out to them that it wasn't dangerous to you, and that you really needed it."

"Dangerous? What is it exactly?" All I'd imagined was a high powered stimulant and high calorie food.

"It contains complex chains of amino acids—"

I could almost hear him mentally switching gears at the blank look on my face – I'd never cared for chemistry.

"In essence, Ms Reynolds it's both an extremely strong stimulant, and a high calorie complex of starch and sugars. Nothing previously unknown, and there are some unique chains—"

"Then how's it a poison?"

"It isn't, not really. It's just extremely strong. So strong that almost anybody other than you who swallowed one would have a high risk of their heart exploding, or suffering total metabolic collapse. I would strongly recommend never taking more than two under any circumstances."

"Oh – I won't then." Definitely, absolutely I wouldn't!

"I also need to ask you a question. Don't feel required to answer, but if you have any information it would be a great help."

I turned my ears towards him.

"There is one victim of the Xanadu Effect that we, and the FBI are looking

for. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you why unless you join us. However, if you have had any interactions with him, any information at all would be useful." He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a grainy black and white photograph that looked to be expanded from the video of a security camera. It showed a large humanoid rabbit, likely white but there was no way to be sure. "I have reports that this individual's fur is pure white, and he has blue eyes. Other than that—" he shrugged.

"Dr Quest, I can assure you that I've never seen him. You've known where I've been all this time!"

"Did you encounter him before the Xanadu Effect? We know his first name is "Phil" but not much else."

I shook my head. "Sorry."

"I didn't think so, but I had to ask. Anyway...." Dr Quest pulled out a thick official government package stamped "TOP SECRET" and handed it to me. I was afraid to touch it.

"Don't worry, your stuff is in there – it was just the handiest package I had of the right size."

I flicked my ears at that one.

"Now, as I was saying about the organization—"

"Dr Quest, why are you telling me all this? Do you want me to help you hunt down this Phil?" I took the package from him.

"Not at this time. I would like you to consider joining us though."

Huh? "Me?" My voice came out more as a squeak than my normal tone. Or my normal tone now.

"I think you can be helpful in a minor role. Technical aid for our computer hardware, low profile remote reconnaissance—"

Dear God! A vision flashed through of myself as a black flying commando in the sky.... Then I remembered footage of that battle in New York and saw myself being blown apart by an energy blast projected from the rabbit's eyes. "No!"

"The benefits are excellent, and you can help us analyze—"

"No. I'm sorry, Dr Quest. It's tempting, I admit—" My ears blushed and I knew that I wouldn't tell him the real reason. I could feel the outside calling me. "—but right now I just want to go home."

He frowned. "I didn't expect you to agree given your psychological profile, but I've been wrong before. Not often though. Well, I would like you to keep it in mind. You can call us," he pulled a card out of the binder and held it out to me, "at any time. Either decision is fine with me, and with my superiors."

I shuffled restlessly, I could feel my panic growing, and I didn't know

how I could stop it. Why now? Was it because I was so close to getting outside...? I could hear it calling me. "I.... I'm sorry. Can— Can I go now?"

"Certainly, Ms Reynolds. Just think about my offer. I got all the processing completed before I called you in because I figured you'd need to leave quickly."

I just nodded as he held out his hand and I clasped it and we shook. His grasp was snug, not too tight, and his palm warm. Mine was wet.

"Thanks doctor. I wish— I have to go— I'm sorry." I grabbed the package and turned away as a man in a suit opened the door for me.

"Follow him, Ms Reynolds – he'll lead you out."

"Thank you, Dr Quest. Thanks very much." I turned and rushed out, wings raised behind me for balance. The man had to hurry to keep up. Because of his presence, I guess, nobody stopped me, and it wasn't long until I was finally able to go out through the main doors of the hotel—

My package almost slipped from my hands, and my luggage—

The sights! I closed my second eyelids and the world softened for a moment and then became sheathed in translucent zephyrs that curled and flowed and streamed around me in patterns. It took me a second to realize it, but then I *knew* I was seeing air currents, temperature differentials....

The scents! The sweetness of grass. The bitterness of fertilizer. Maple and oak trees lining the grounds. Faint stench of carbon monoxide and car exhaust. Odd spicy scents I didn't recognize, faint and old. I panted, sucking in deep short gasps of air to sample the scents, to feel them, to swim in them.

The sounds! The hiss of wind in the grass and leaves. The cacophony of birdsong. A distant growl. The dim roar of cars and trucks on the highway. My ears swiveled, focusing on one and then the other and then the other—

Behind me I dimly heard, "Ms Reynolds...?" but it meant nothing to me. I outstretched my wings, letting a faint breeze I could see rustle the tips of my primary feathers, each movement sending pulses of information down nerves and into a portion of my brain I hadn't had a month ago.

The doors softly hissed shut behind me.

My pectorals yanked and my wings stroked downwards. My gills pulsed open and oxygen roared through them sucked into my blood, pulsing through my body as I became alive like I'd never been alive before.

A couple steps forward, my hooves clacking on the walkway.... A quick upstroke, wings curved to minimize resistance as they hissed back to their aphelion, and then they outstretched, cupping the wind, and my pectorals yanked them down. More steps, almost a gallop as my wings beat faster and

faster. I could feel the mohawk-cut mane on top of my head pulling tighter from muscles in my scalp as the wind of my passage pressed against it. I stopped galloping and started bounding, leaping up with each downstroke, moving faster and faster—

Until I wasn't running or bounding anymore.

My legs pressed together behind me, my lower leg joints stretching until my legs were horizontally behind me as a bird's tail. My wings beat faster and faster and I stretched out my body, my hands clasping my package close to my chest. Breezes pulsed through my nostrils as I panted for breath; oxygen whirled through my blood as my heart beat faster and faster until it was just a tingle as was my whole body. The breeze of my passage massaged my fur.

Cocking my head I looked down, the wind hissing past my ears now pointing behind me. Xanadu spread out below me, smaller and smaller. Figures turning to tiny sticks, though I found I could focus on one and see them as though they were only a few feet away.

Oh my God.... I was flying!

I... was... *flying!*

I'D DESCENDED FROM MY FIRST FLIGHT when my wings grew sore. It'd been hours – how long I couldn't really say – but I felt better, infinitely better. The desperation, the insanity, that had been scratching at my mind, was gone, and for the first time since the Xanadu Effect I felt comfortable with myself.

Of course, my landing wasn't as graceful as my takeoff, and I ended up curling my wings around me and rolling and tumbling across the lawn. Sheepishly I walked back to the hotel, stomach growling angrily, and went to the cafeteria and grabbed about fifteen pounds of hot juicy meat. When I was finally full I took the elevator to my room and packed my stuff and left. My blood was whirring through me. It was like I was high on drugs. I ran into a white-furred otter that'd been trapped too – I knew him from IRC as, oddly, SnowOtter.

After I didn't say anything, still lost in the memory of flight, he burst out with, "And what are *you* so happy about? Going home?" He snorted and dooked angrily at me.

I just looked at him and smiled wider, wider than I thought my face was capable of. "I.... I flew—"

"Holy shit! You did? You can?"

"Oh God, can I!"

"They let you then?"

"I don't think they could stop me now."

He shuffled his feet as I burst into a loud piercing bouncing whistle of the brassy opening theme from Star Wars, hopping from hoof to hoof as the elevator slid downward.

"Could you keep it to yourself a bit, maybe? Some of us are still stuck here, you know."

I earblushed, but couldn't stop.

My bag was large—I'd brought more than I really needed, as usual—and it got really heavy before I got to my car. My clothes were finally comfortable, not tearing or pulling at my fur. I'd put my flight suit on underneath like an old friend, and that had made everything good. I'd seriously considered flying home. My body was eager, almost desperate, to get back into the air. However, I managed to force myself not to, as I needed to take my car and my luggage back. Getting into the car was a pain, and I was fortunate it was a hatchback. I had to push the seat as far back as it would go, twist my tail around so that it painfully bent up my back, and wedge my wings over the back of the seat and against the rear window.

Getting back home took about two hours as I lived fairly close. I think I drove a little fast, but I didn't care. I put in a CD of *The Empire Strikes Back* and let its themes pound through me as I weaved through traffic. I was so happy I wanted to explode! Driving with both windows down, the sunlight streaming through my glossy black fur, it was probably a good thing I didn't run into a cop. I had to force down the urge to hang my head out the window like an overeager dog.

I guess people stared at me as I parked in the underground lot under the apartment building I'd lived in, but I was oblivious. Taking the elevator up to the twenty-ninth floor, I was still whistling to myself as I let myself into my apartment. It was still cluttered, and badly needed to be dusted and aired out. Instead, I just dropped my luggage and strutted across the room. Yanking the sliding door to the balcony open, I stood out, leaning over the railing, letting the cool winter air pour over me.

It was great to be alive!

I'd been let out on a Wednesday, and slowly I came down from my high and got things organized. Apartment cleaned, clothes put away, a prioritization of things to be modified so that I could wear them in my new body. Picking up the big pile of bills and writing the assorted checks to get them all paid and up to date. Calling work to let them know I'd be in tomorrow—

The phone was annoying. I'd forgotten as I hadn't used one in weeks. The best I could do was hold the earpiece near my ear and just speak

loudly and hope the mouthpiece picked it up. I imagine it looked funny, the tiny phone against the head of a horse, one part just below one ear that was twisted down to try and hear from it, and the other part listening to my cheek.

After tossing the spoiled leftovers and running them down to the garbage bin, still whistling, waving cheerfully at the people who stopped and stared at me, I put together a meat-rich casserole from frozen meat I had in the freezer. My stomach almost couldn't wait; it was fortunate I'd grabbed a Burger King takeout on my way back.

Late that night I got to sleep on my own bed, curled up in a mound of fur and tail and feathers, feeling absolutely that all was right with the world.

LIFE SETTLED DOWN AFTER THAT, or so I thought. I went back to work, explained things – the government ID really helped – and went back to technical support for customers, setting schedules, and helping with sales on the floor. After some thought I sold my car; I found that I never used it anymore, and ended up flying back and forth from work, and to almost anywhere else I wanted. When the weather was really bad I used transit. Small, crowded, and with some highly annoying people, I found it easiest to move to the back, sit on an empty seat, and ignore everybody as they shifted away from me. I gradually converted my clothes, donating what I couldn't use such as the bras and pantyhose. Almost always I wore the flight suit underneath as it made sure my fur was never bothered by what I was wearing. I washed it in cold on delicate. And it was probably a good thing that I didn't need to worry about cold winter temperatures, being in Florida and all. I doubt that would have stopped my flights even if I'd lived up in Canada somewhere.

Christmas came and went, and a visit with the family. My two nieces loved me. My parents were more skeptical, but they could still see what I'd been in what I'd become, and by the end of the holiday love had conquered all. The government ID and the television reports about Xanadu certainly helped.

Winter ended, and spring began, and slowly, almost unnoticeably, things started to go wrong. I was assigned less and less time on the floor as customers seemed to hurry to the other salespersons. When I ran to help somebody, they almost always said they didn't need help, and after I'd left I could see them go to someone else out of the corner of my extraordinarily wide field of vision. Most of the technerds didn't, as only my knowledge was comparable to theirs. But everybody else....



I wasn't stupid; I could see the writing on the wall. The odd time I had to take transit only reinforced it. Subtle stares and hints, body language, whispered comments that I could often make out, all drove me to the back of the bus. Even the blacks whispered about me, a lot of them glad that they were no longer on the bottom. The growing reports of supervillains causing mass damage didn't help matters at all.

So I updated my resume, and started fishing around. I got interviews, but when I arrived they were short, and always ended up with a "we'll call you". It was discouraging, but chats online helped – I wasn't the only one facing problems in society.

There was always Dr Quest's offer if it all fell apart. But I really didn't want to get involved in that. Some of the newsreels of supervillains, and even heroes, in action, scared the crap out of me. A lot of those who'd gone were gadgeteers, and they were making their skills felt with all kinds of horrific devices. Somebody who'd become Iron Man had formed a League of Justice that helped a lot, and they even started working on their own orbiting Watchtower. There were rumours of Dr Quest and his team floating around, of some whom had become "Men in Black" co-operating to cover up the most extreme events. News was less often live, and more often taped.

At least the economy was booming. Eric Winters started it when he brought out a rubber-composite fibre optic. And then a corporation calling themselves Real Stark Industries started coming out with all kinds of new technologies. Other Xanadu "victims" started following suit.

The superheroes were almost never out of the news. DC and Marvel went after them, after all the heroes, claiming that they owned them. Thankfully the Supreme Court finally ruled against their ownership of the people who'd become superheroes and supervillains the two companies had originally created. Of course, this was then appealed; genetically engineered life forms had been patented, and what was a superhero or villain and their unique DNA other than a new patentable life form?

Oh, I could have kept up with the technological revolution, but I found my heart wasn't in it anymore. Where once computers had fascinated me, now they were just a job. For years I'd driven myself to be the best in a man's world, and I'd succeeded. Now, I didn't care. Instead I flew and spent my weekends in parks. I grew depressed. It was a slow fall. I can see that in hindsight, but then I was oblivious.

Then it all fell apart. I was fired. Their reasons were a list of minor offenses: being late, inattention, lack of willingness to apply myself, body

odour – I was showering daily, but I did smell a bit like a horse. All kinds of little things, but together they were damning. I was escorted out, trying to hold back tears.

Nobody even said goodbye.

Waiting for me when I got back was an eviction notice. I ripped it off and read it, disbelieving. Again, it was a list of minor reasons – noise, lack of cleanliness, complaints from other apartments....

I had to get out. I had to get out of the closed-in room, away from the walls, the ceiling – Throwing myself off the balcony, I flew into the developing storm, not caring and not knowing what to do, only knowing that I had to get out, get away—

**KRAKABOOM!**

All around me the sky was black as hell. Howling wind tore at my feathers. Hail smashed against my rubbery flight suit.

I didn't know if the water in my eyes had leaked through my flight goggles, or was from my tears. I hadn't done anything wrong! *Why me?*

*Krakaboom!*

A jagged line of electrical fire tore across the sky; the sound pounded through my body even though my ears were pulled tight against my skull. Like hitting a wall, a downdraft slammed against me, the air somehow thicker and darker in the near blackness to my vision, and I shot down like an express elevator. Flapping frantically as each twitching feather fed me information, I let the wind drive me as I fought for control. Fighting the howling wind, feeling the oxygen pulse through my gills and roar through my blood, I let the wind drive me.

Suddenly I was out of it, and momentarily out of the rain. I flapped frantically, not able to see anything, but knowing I needed height. I needed to get above the howling maelstrom if I wanted to ride it out.

*If I wanted to ride it out.*

*Krakaboom!*

I was back in the rain, and it burst into me like a wall of water, oozing down my face, dribbling around my goggles, tickling my gills with stabs of ice cold. I could feel my feathers beginning to absorb water, and if that happened then I was toast. At least the flight suit kept most of me dry. My muscles ached, especially my pectorals.

Absentmindedly, I reached down through the hole into the pouch of high energy concentrate and grabbed one – no, two – and shoved them into my mouth as my wings beat frantically. They oozed down my throat

and I almost gagged at the taste, but then I felt their energy burst into me. My vision sharpened and my wing beat steadied.

Desperately I looked around, peering through the driving rain, the after image of the lightning still speckling my vision. The air was a morass of hot and cold spirals and currents, a tangled nightmare. I looked for an updraft. There had to be one – I *needed* there to be one—

*Krakaboom....*

Another shock of lightning, distant and quieter, but for an instant I thought I'd seen something. An updraft, though it was hard to tell in the tangled mess.

Water poured off me, but not as fast as it poured on. I struggled to reach what I thought I'd seen. One good updraft could carry me through the cloud cover and above the storm—

To what? I had no job. I had no home.

My steady wingbeat faltered, and it wasn't exhaustion.

It would be so easy to just give in, let the storm drive me to the ground. A quick easy death—

*Krakaboom!*

I fell closer and closer to the ground, rain hissing around me. I could see the updraft now, a roaring twister of power and energy that I knew was what I needed. New energy, buoyed by my dreams, by my memories of my first flight, burst through me. I tucked my wings close behind me and dove through the air towards the updraft. Below I could see dim ghosts of streetlights and they were close. Far, *far* closer than I'd have liked—

I burst into the howling updraft, feeling the whirling force of its heat like a thin film as I pierced its edge. My wings snapped open and I was yanked upward, hot misty air condensing on my cold goggles, my cold flight suit, and I was spun up and up. Screaming in excitement, I heard my wings creak and moan, pulling at my shoulders with a cleansing agony. I was on an express elevator, but not to hell – to heaven!

And then I was flung free, thrown out like flotsam from a fountain, tumbling and falling through the air, my wings tangled around me. For a second I just let myself fall, the world spinning around me, and then I stretched out my other arms, my wings, and grabbed the sweet air. A couple of quick wingstrokes to steady myself, and then I held them steady and just soared.

Above me in the crystal clear air was a half moon and millions of twinkling stars. Points of warmth and nurturing so far away that I could only dream of them. Below me an irregular twirling sea of black cotton lit by

intermittent pulses of lightning deep that roiled and bounded inside like an overcharged strobe light about to explode.

How could I have even thought of giving this up? How?

With my wings outstretched, my gills remained open, and the cold cold air silently whistled through them. It wasn't the same deep richness of oxygen that a wing stroke generated, but a warm caress. My flight suit was amazingly insulated when it needed to be, and I'd be fine for a while. Rapid pulses of exhalation burst from me in clouds of mist that were whipped behind me and lost.

But was this worth it? Worth the pain? The humiliation? Oh God, what was I going to do?

I stayed above the storm for hours, a timeless flight trapping me between heaven and earth. I couldn't go any higher, and going down through the storm wasn't the best of ideas. The only movement I made, other than breathing, was the occasionally stiff flap to break off the ice that was crystallizing on my damp wings.

I didn't know what to do. Go back to what? Staying on until they kicked me out? I had no job, and rapidly diminishing prospects of getting a new one. If I even could – I was having growing doubts. Sure, I could take them both to court, probably win, but the resulting environment was not one that appealed to me.

Clutching my arms in front of me, I shivered. I was getting cold and would have to go down soon.... At least the storm was finally starting to clear.

Or, I could just stay up here until I was so cold I couldn't fly, and then I'd plummet, falling from the heavens like an angel rejected by God, until I thudded into the ground, making a mess for somebody.

But I didn't want to die!

I checked my inertial compass. I hadn't reset it when I'd gotten home from work, but I knew that distance and mentally subtracted it. I'd come a long way.

A shiver burst from my legs and I jerked in flight, losing some altitude.

Why me? Why did I deserve this?

"I don't want to die!"

My teeth chattered and I forced myself to put them together. Dr Quest had advised against it, but I had little choice and grabbed another stimulant and swallowed it. I didn't even taste it, but warmth swept through my body and I steadied my tumbling flight. The clouds were only a short distance below me, billowing masses of mist and cotton, slowly breaking

up. I pushed my wings up into a V shape so that air spilled off their tips, curdling around the primaries before spilling off. The mist was thick around me, fogging my goggles with warm moist air. I could feel the warmth falling into my bones as I fell downwards, ever downwards. Hot breath pulsed in and out, my goggles fogged completely and I carefully pulled them off and grasped them, crossing my arms back over my chest. I wanted to make sure the wind didn't rip them off never to be seen again.

I could just see the ad in the local paper: Lost, a pair of rubber goggles for anthropomorphic pegasus. Black in colour and made out of an unknown fantastic material. Please return to Angela Reynolds, somewhere above the clouds. I laughed out loud as I fell in a semi-controlled fashion, feeling almost drunk.

Bursting through the clouds, I looked down upon farmlands and scattered woods. There were a few house lights, but not much to see by as the clouds hid most of the moonlight.

Maybe I could fly on the moon – Heinlein had people do it.

I giggled again, still holding my wings up, spilling air and falling, the wind whistling past me. I wondered how fast I could go and raised my wings higher, spilling more air. Wasn't terminal velocity one hundred miles an hour? It sounded like fun!

What was wrong with me? It's almost like I was drunk.

So?

The third pill?

But I needed it.

I'll die!

So? What's to live for?

What's to live for? Well—

Flying? I'm flying now, and I'll be flying until I die. Isn't it fun?

Yes, but—

The wind whistled past my ears and I strained to pull my wings down a bit to get some control. Air howled past them and I was spun round and around, faster and faster like a propeller.

This is even better!

The ground was close now. So cold and hard and annoying. I didn't want to die!

The pain won't last long!

But think of what might have been.

Nothing better than what has been.

It will so be!

I slowly, painfully, pulled my wings down and further and further

outright. With a crack that slammed into my ears, I snapped out of the spin and shot out across the grass below. The wind squeezed against my feathers, my primaries bent sending stabs of pain shooting through me. I could feel myself slowing, arcing out into leveler and leveler flight. But the ground was so close. Too close. My body buzzed from the oxygen roaring through its blood. I dragged my wings down, bounced up. Another flap, another. I could feel my head clearing, a little. Air howled past me, a primary was ripped off and I screamed, but couldn't hear myself. I tumbled, leaned back, dragged my wings down again, let them be pushed back up, down again, up, down, up down.... I slowed. I felt grass yanking against my pasterns. I was going too fast, too fast! I stroked again and again, fatigue burning my muscles, the ground slowing, slowing.... Almost safe to land — I bounced up —

And then I lost it!

All I could do was curl up as I spun into the ground, the tall stiff grass catching me and accelerating me into a roll. Faster and faster, lower and lower. The grass pressed around me. The spring ground yanked at me, the damp earth tearing and clutching —

I WOKE UP, SHIVERING, COLD, DAMP, with a whole-body dull throbbing pain. Something nibbled comfortingly at my neck and my mouth squeezed and sucked. Warm liquid oozed down my parched throat into my empty stomach.

Blinking open my eyes, I waited as my vision cleared, and the reality around me slowly faded into existence. I saw the dusty hide of a horse just above me, and realized that I was sucking, suckling, drinking, whatever, at a mare's teats —

I screamed, a loud piercing cry of blind panic and tried to crawl away on my back. Instead I fell on my side, instinctively curling up. Spikes of pain shot through me. Shocks from the ends of my wings, stabs of pulled muscles in my arms, and a hot red burning poker from one leg.

All around me the horses, there were seven, stopped eating the choice bits of grass and looked up. A stallion, night black like I was, reared up and neighed loudly, and then I felt relaxation flow through the herd.

And through me.

The mare I'd been beneath stepped away so that the blinding sunlight shone on my muzzle. Turning, I looked straight into her muzzle.

It was huge! The horses, the entire herd, were all around me. Huge, monstrous —

The mare exhaled and blew her scent across me, and then took a step closer and nuzzled again at my neck.

I dragged myself backward, my torn wings digging into the muddy ground, my snapped leg straightening painfully. I gasped for breath, eyes wide, nostrils quivering.

The mare stepped over me, easily striding past what small movement I could muster, until its teats were once again in easy reach of my muzzle.

My stomach chose that moment to growl but I refused the obvious and fumbled around with one hand and grabbed some grass – it was something – and stuffed it into my lips. I could taste the rubber of my goggles – I’d managed to not drop them – and carefully pulled and sucked the grass from my grasp and absentmindedly chewed on it. It was soft, green, and slightly minty, but bland. Like softer, thinner celery.

My eyes were only on the mare that towered over me.

“Pansy! Whatcha got there, girl?”

The mare – Pansy? – stepped away from me, and I heard the horses shuffling a bit, but they weren’t uncomfortable, just nervous. My ears flicked around looking for the source of their nervousness and I picked up the sound of footsteps slurping through the mud and dirt towards me.

The mare stood beside me and nickered, and nickers and sighs echoed through the herd. I looked up at the man. Here I was, covered in mud and grass, grass sticking out of my mouth. My wings were muddy and torn, one leg bent at an unnatural angle. Blood was oozing from my lower legs and hands where my flight suit didn’t cover.

“By God, Pansy, what the hell did ya find now?” He shaded his eyes from the early morning sun. “Could it be an angel that has fallen from heaven?”

I tried to say something, but the only thing that came out was a ragged coughing that shook my body, sending stabs of pain through me, along with specks of milk and blood. I couldn’t stop coughing and shivering, and then I started sneezing on top of everything else.

The next thing I knew I was being carried, every step sending pain stabbing through me as my one leg wobbled in a horribly unnatural fashion. I was still shivering uncontrollably, but at least the coughing and sneezing had stopped. I could feel my ears, my muzzle, my chest, burning with fever. My sight was blurred and uneven. A screen door was pulled open with a creak and then the inner door was pushed open with a wrench. I was swept inside, the screen door banging shut behind me, carried up old creaking stairs, and gently set on my side on a soft bed that groaned at my

slight weight. Gently he stretched out my wings, but each touch felt like a knife stabbing into me and I couldn't help but scream, and then cough and shiver uncontrollably.

"I don't know what ya are, an angel or one of them demons, but by God I won't let a livin' bein' suffer. Now where be the seams in this thing you wearin'?"

I couldn't see clearly and my body was wracked with pain and shivers, but somehow I managed to drag an arm around and press the seam behind my neck. I couldn't get all of it, just enough to give him the idea.

"Ach! What am I thinkin'?" Gently he wrapped blankets around me. "Now ya just wait right there. I'm goin' call a doctor, a vet, somethin', and I hope ta God he'll know what ta do here 'cause I sure don't. Just rest, I'll be back...."

He turned and I heard his foot steps cross the creaking floor as my body shivered and shook. Relaxing, my heat trapped by the blankets and held against me, I let my rubber goggles thunk to the floor.

THE NEXT THING I KNEW WAS a hot stiffness, pain, and a familiar voice speaking over me. "Who'd have thought?" It wasn't the man who'd carried me in, it was the same veterinarian who'd examined me at Xanadu. I found out later that it wasn't such a coincidence as he was the only vet specializing in equines in this area of Florida. Gently he clasped the sides of my muzzle in soft warm arms and I blearily focused on him. "Angela, isn't it?"

I nodded just a little bit, even that movement sending stabs of pain through me, and starting the shivering all over again.

He unwrapped the blankets from around me, dried mud clinging to them but pulling easily from my flight suit. Not from my feathers – they were yanked, sending new stabs of pain through my wings. My stomach growled unhappily too.

"David, you get some porridge made up for her. Rich and thick – add some horse feed, grind it up if you can. She needs food. I've got to take a look at her."

"Right away, doctor. I'll add some of that there cinnamon and—"

"Add nothing – just bring the porridge as I described."

"It'll be as ya say, doctor." Dimly, his footsteps creaked out of the room.

"Now, lets take a look at you—" He felt around and I neighed and gasped in pain. "Some broken or bruised ribs, I think, and the leg.... I need to get that thing off you."



I tried to reach the seam but I couldn't move my arms, and another bout of shivering shook through me.

"Make it nice and hot, David!"

"Press – back—" I managed to croak out faintly, but he heard, or he figured it out. "Don't cut!" I felt fingers around my neck, around the seam I'd started to open, and then I felt the slight release of pressure as he ran his finger down and opened the seam the rest of the way.

"I'm afraid this is going to hurt, but I have to get this off and I don't know whether or not I can even cut it. All the damn crap coming out of Xanadu – nobody knows anything 'bout things any more."

I just panted for breath, the room spinning as he gently lifted me up and unpeeled the flight suit from me. By the time it was half way off, I started screaming, screaming again and again. Only when the thing was off and tossed into the corner did I sob with relief. Gently, he set me back down on the bed as my agony decayed to dull burning.

"You're a mess. What the hell happened to you? Never mind, you just need to rest."

I felt his fingers run along my ribs, my upper legs and arms, and the base of my wings. All I could do was screech out choked sobs at the agony that burned through me at the touch.

"I bet it feels a lot worse than it is. The only thing that seems broken is your right postern bone, and that hasn't broken the skin. Your body though is just one giant bruise, and your muscles are like iron. Your wings, I think, are fine. Missing feathers, but other than that – hell, I don't know. They don't *look* wrong's all I can say."

The floor creaked—

I snorted. Something rich and wonderful and hot filled my nostrils and my stomach growled its eagerness.

I heard the other voice. "I got that porridge ya asked for, doc. Added a pound or so of that rich feed you got me for the nursing mare."

Smelling the bowl being put in front of my face, I stuck my muzzle in, and started sucking it up even before they could try and spoon it in.

"David, you gotta feed her as much of this as she'll eat. At least once every other hour. If she's asleep don't wake her, but otherwise force it down her throat if you need to. From what I remember reading about her she's got the metabolism of an enraged bull – I don't think you can overfeed her. You keep at it – I gotta get something from my truck."

I heard footsteps leave but was licking the last bits from the bowl, the porridge a hot lump in my happy stomach.

"Now angel, don' ya fret none. David here'll take care of ya. Just ya rest and heal. 'Tis the best thing there be for ya." One of his hands patted my shoulder. I was too tired to snap at him treating me like an animal, but I think the gasp of pain did the job for me.

He pulled the clean bowl away from me, and I stretched out my muzzle to try and get more. Until a stabbing pain in my neck stopped me and I gasped.

"I'll get downstairs and make some more of this stuff for ya then. Doctor?"

"David, I'll be up in a couple of minutes! I need something to make a splint."

"I'm gonna make her more of that porridge stuff ya recommended!"

"Great! The more the better!"

I heard David's footsteps creaking away across the floor and just gasped for breath, moving a little bit to try and find some kind of comfortable position, but only finding lesser and greater amounts of pain. I started shivering, and didn't even have the breath to scream as pain tore through me.

The doctor came back. "Shit! Leg then blankets— David! Hurry up with that porridge! And I need you up here! I just hope this works...."

He lifted up my one leg and I screamed, my cries fading to a hoarse gurgle as he pulled my leg outward, red hot pain filling my vision. I gasped for breath. An ice cold rod stabbed itself along my pastern as I fought to breathe. Soft straps were wrapped around and tightened almost to the edge of the bearable. My gills flared open as I tried to get enough oxygen into my blood and my wings struggled feebly.

"Stay still! I got to do this if you ever want to stand again! And I don't even know if it'll work...."

Finally he lowered my leg back onto the bed and I gasped for breath as the pain subsided to a loud roar.

"Doctor, I got her some more—"

"Great! Grind these up and mix them in and then feed her all she'll eat."

"What're ya doing to her doc?"

"Painkiller and sedative. It'll help her sleep, I hope. Stuff I normally use for horses, but she's more horse than human now. As far as I know it'll work on her."

"If ya'll be sure doc."

"You feed her – I gotta talk to somebody and hopefully I'll be back in less'n an hour. Just keep feeding her until she sleeps, and feed her whenever she wakes up."

I felt stabs of pain as he drapped the blankets over me, but then all I could sense was the hot porridge and I shoved my muzzle into it and sucked it up.

“Keep her warm.”

THE SUN WAS SETTING and its light blasted through the window making me blink. I was without pain, without any pain, and I didn't feel feverish. Somehow I knew it was fake though. My body felt like sluggish china, like a computer with a bad virus. There was a weight on my leg and I could see some kind of large bulk under the blankets wrapped around me. I decided not to move it. My stomach was painfully empty, and my throat painfully dry.

Unfortunately, I was on my side, stiff, and facing the window. With wings growing from my back, my options were limited, so I decided to *very* carefully roll over onto my stomach and then onto my other side. Trying to keep my legs straight, I rolled slowly and painfully. I felt some twinges, but nothing really painful.

Feeling around, I realized that I was on my stomach and had run out of bed to roll on to. At least the sun felt nice on my back.

“Hello?”

My voice was a hoarse croak, barely intelligible, and barely above a whisper. I tried to clear my throat, a horrible growling sound like a badly tuned car starting up.

“Hello!” I gasped for breath. “Anybody?”

“Just ah tiny minute angel!” came up faintly from downstairs.

I guess I couldn't expect to be waited on hand and foot. But then why wasn't I in a hospital? I had paid for medical coverage!

My stomach growled angrily.

“I'm hungry!” I gasped out. Sometimes I hated my appetite—

A wondrous aroma blasted through my nostrils and distracted me from the man walking in, the floor creaking under his steps, as he shoved a bowl of that hot steaming porridge in front of me. Before I could even think my muzzle was in it and I was sucking it up. It didn't take long and it wasn't enough, but it was enough so that I could think.

“How'd tha angel get all a tangled up there?”

Turning my head, I looked at my saviour, really looked for the first time. He was a largish man, well tanned, his balding hair tangled, and I could smell horse strongly on him. He was wearing a dirty lumberjack shirt and jeans, and I could smell hints of mud and manure coming from them. The scents didn't bother me; they actually made me relax.

"I got some milk for ya to drink, if ya want. Doc said ya should." He looked from me to the glass he was holding. "I don't think this here is goin' ta work." Shrugging, he poured the milk into the bowl I'd just finished.

I turned and looked at him.

"Nothin' in there ta harm ya."

I didn't have much choice, and, given how sluggish I was, didn't want to risk moving my arms or sitting up, and spilling it all over the bed, which was thankfully still dry. So I carefully sniffed at it. It was good, really good, so I stuck my muzzle in and started sucking it up. I'd tried lapping shortly after my change, but it seemed that sucking through my muzzle like a straw worked best.

It was warm, but sweet and rich. It didn't taste like milk. It tasted like—

"Crap!"

I yanked my muzzle away and spit out the milk, and then squealed at the explosion of pain before falling onto the bed and gasping for breath.

I remembered waking up. I remembered the mare. I remembered her milk. It was this milk. "Are you trying to poison me?"

"Poison ya? Why would ya think that kind o' nonsense?"

"It's *horse* milk."

"Of course it t'is. Poor Pansy lost her little foal – I milk her each night and use tha milk for maself."

Poor little mare.... Still, it seemed that I was in the hands of the village idiot! "I want to see a doctor, a *real* doctor! And I want to be in a hospital! *Now!*"

He just looked at me and sighed. "Ms Reynolds, I've had doctors here and they've examined you. Dr Haynes braced your leg and provided medicine, and he brought a regular MD, Dr Gilson, and together they put a cast around ya leg. They both told me to tell you that your only job was to rest and eat, and that a hospital wouldn't give ya any better service, and that the publicity would just keep ya from healing.

"Now, I know you be in pain Ms Reynolds, so I'll forgive ya this once. I assisted the good doctors as I have my own fancy degrees in veterinary medicine and animal behaviour. I may not know all ya new fangled technology, but I know humans, and I know animals, and right now you're less'n either."

He reached down and roughly grabbed the blanket I was tangled up in and jerked it off as I winced and gasped. Before I could react he picked me up and set me on my side facing him, and then he gently tucked me in, making sure I was nice and cozy.

"I'm gonna go down and make some more of that porridge for ya, Ms Reynolds. And then ya'll eat it down. And I'll bring the last of tha milk from poor Pansy and I'll pour it down your damn throat in a funnel if I have to. And, just for ya high and mighty city education, mare's milk is almost identical to human milk, and is *far* more healthy for ya than the crap ya buy in them thar supermarkets!" With that he grabbed the bowl and glass and stomped out, the floor creaking loudly beneath him.

I could feel my ears blushing as I watched him go. Here I was prejudging a country bumpkin who had multiple degrees. I blinked back tears of embarrassment, of depression, of pain. My life was falling apart and all I was doing was making it worse. The tears didn't stop.

I smelled him as he came up and heard him drag a chair loudly across the floor but I couldn't see a thing. I felt a soft hankie touch at my eyes, and then he spoon fed me the porridge and I didn't complain. And when he filled the bowl with the rest of the milk, I just sucked it down. I was feeling drowsy, drugs maybe, and the dull ache slowly faded, even as he put me on a couch, changed the bed sheets, put me back and tucked me in.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, I didn't get much thinking or anything else done. I drifted in and out of consciousness, mostly out. All I did was just lay and ate and drank and slept. David never stayed. He just dutifully fed me, changed the bedpans, changed the bed clothes, and left me alone.

Oh God, I hoped I hadn't made him angry or anything. But what was wrong with a hospital? X-rays would make me feel better. And a mirror so that I could brush myself properly.

Slowly I got stronger, and slowly the pain faded, though my confusion didn't. It finally came to a head one day as David brought me another bowl of the enriched porridge.

"Can I have my stuff?"

"Excuse me, Ms? Do you mean them thar possessions of yours?"

"I need to call places, let people know I'm all—"

"Who?"

I looked at him and blinked.

"I couldn't help but overhear ya – sometimes when ya were sufferin' from that delirium ya had, ya mumbled and screamed. Nobody deserves losin' both job and home at the same time."

"Oh."

He turned away.

"Wait! But I should call my family—"

"Fraid I can't help ya there."

"My cell phone!"

He just sighed and walked over into the corner and picked up one of my belt pouches and dumped it on the bed. My ID fell out, as did my billfold, makeup, perfume, and my cracked and shattered cellphone.

I looked from the phone to him to the phone to him. "May I use your phone then?"

"Don' have one."

"How the hell can you not have a phone?"

He just looked at me, and then blinked. For a second he clenched his teeth. "Ms Reynolds, you're here as my guest. Ya may wish to think about that."

"Then why am I here and *not* in a hospital? And why don't you have a phone? And a TV? You at *least* have to be able to get satellite out here! Or are you one of those," I held my fingers out to form quotes, "blinking twelves?"

He turned and walked out of the room. "I'll be back with your final bowl, and then ya can sleep."

*"Get back here! I'm talking to you!"*

All I heard was his footsteps going downstairs as I screamed after him. A few minutes later, by the time I'd screamed myself out, I heard him coming back up.

He sat down on a chair he'd put near me and held the bowl of porridge under my muzzle. I wasn't that hungry so I ignored it. Time to try a different tact. "I'm sorry – I may have been a bit rude to you. But is it too much to expect civilized treatment?"

He just looked at me and sighed.

"Is a *phone* too much to ask?"

"I told ya that I donna have one."

*"Then get mine fixed! Or call them and get them to send a replacement here!"*

"I said that I donna have a phone."

*"Well then, go and tell them in person!"* I glared at him, my breath pulsing through my nostrils. He just looked back.

Then he put the bowl on the bed and got up to leave. "I'll be back later." Turning, he walked out.

*"I'm talking to you! Don't you dare walk out on me! Don't you dare!"*

For the first time he closed the door to the room I was in and walked off as I yelled and screamed after him.

I finally shut up when my voice was hoarse and weak, and my growling traitorous stomach made me eat the cold porridge. A few minutes later I was out like a light.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS PASSED very slowly and boringly. I had no company, no TV, no computer. Hell, not even a radio! I couldn't even get a hold of a book!

I slept when I could, otherwise I just stared at the wall, or out the window, and fumed. All I could do was watch the world quietly drift by, the horses in the fields, the chickens eating their morning grain. I needed to get on the Internet!

For all I knew, aliens could have landed!

David just came up four or six times a day with food and milk for me. He just ignored me, fed me like a petulant child with a large wooden spoon, and kept a funnel on his belt just in case.

Three days later somebody creaked their way up the stairs. I'd decided to give David the Silent Treatment. Nothing else had worked.

"So Ms Reynolds, feeling better?"

I scrambled around and looked at Dr Haynes, my surviving primaries tugging painfully as I moved my wings under the cover. I looked like a mess, but I didn't care. "Finally! Somebody who has a foot in the real world!"

He looked at me, surprise on his face.

"You've gotta get me out of here! To a hospital, or something! Anywhere!"

Dr Haynes looked at me. "Why, has David done anything wrong?"

*"Done anything wrong?"*

"Has the food tasted bad? Has he not fed you enough?"

*"He's abused me!"*

"How? By keeping you warm and clean?"

"But he—"

"Just shut the fuck up, Ms Reynolds. David hasn't complained, hasn't said a word, but I can see it in his eyes."

"See *what*? How he's *abused* me?"

"Ms Reynolds, if we were in a hospital I'd have called a Code White on you, and then thrown you at the reporters. David has gone out of his way to help you, has listened to your hatred, your anger, your God-forsaken attitude!"

He stood up and turned away. "I came here to check on how you were

doing, to see if you're ready to lose that cast. But now, now I don't care – I'll get Dr Gilson over tonight and cut you out and then we'll just throw you out the *damned* window!"

He turned and slammed the door of the room shut so hard that I could feel the whole house shake.

Hmph! Well, good riddance! At least I'd finally get home. And, I'd be magnanimous in my victory.

A FEW HOURS LATER I HEARD footsteps from the hallway, and my stomach growled its eagerness, so I knew it was David. I'd show him how reasonable I could be.

My stomach growled again as the scent of the porridge caressed my nostrils. Odd, how I'd never grown tired of the same taste day after day...

"Well, Mr...?" I asked him as he closed the door.

He stopped and raised an eyebrow. "Call ma David, Ms—"

"Ummm... okay. Dr Haynes was by earlier. He said I should be able to get back to civilization tonight."

"I saw him from out in tha field."

"Well... there you go. I just wanted to thank you. You did the best you could, and I'm grateful. A hospital would've been better, but I guess I was in desperate shape." I could swear that his face was flushing red. I guess he was embarrassed. Reaching out, I patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm grateful. Really."

At that point there was a knock on the door. "David, you in there? It's Albert." I recognized Dr Haynes' voice. Thank God!

"Come on in here, doc! I'm not much for these here formalities, ya know."

The door creaked open and Dr Haynes and Dr Gilson squeezed their way in. Dr Gilson was carrying a small saw with him.

"Don't worry, David, we'll get this monster out of your life and pack her back to the city where she belongs."

"Albert, I donna mind. Really—"

"I don't know how you put up with her. I'd have thrown her out the door after a single day!" Dr Haynes yanked the blanket that was covering me off, pulling at my feathers painfully.

"Hey, do you mind?"

Dr Gilson answered with, "Oh, shut up! We've seen it all before. Now don't move or I might accidentally cut your leg."

David said, "Be careful with that there saw, Daniel—"



"The *doctor* knows what he's doing!" I screamed.

Dr Gilson turned the saw on with a soft whirr and started running it down the cast. I could feel it tickling against my skin, but it didn't cut or hurt.

"She's not that bad, Albert...."

Dr Haynes grabbed my hoof roughly and held it as the saw slowly moved down my cast.

Closing my inner eyelids, I watched the blade slowly move. I was *finally* going to get out of this madhouse!

"I'll buy you a drink when this is over, David. I wish she'd crashed anywhere else," Albert said, but David just shook his head.

Dr Haynes wrenched my leg up and Dr Gilson started cutting down the other side. At least these two were *doctors* and knew what they were doing. Finally the saw reached the far end and was clicked off, whirring to a stop. Dr Gilson yanked the two halves of the cast off, painfully tearing out some of my fur, revealing my thin dusty leg. Dr Haynes roughly pressed his fingers into my leg at various places along its length from top to bottom.

"She gonna be all right there doc?"

"She'll be fine. Looks like it healed fine." He reached the point of the break and I felt a faint stab of pain as he dug a finger into it. "Shit. I don't think we got the bone quite right."

"What?" I screamed.

"You can barely notice it," Dr Gilson said. "She'll walk. Maybe a bit of a limp—"

"*Why the hell didn't you idiots take me to the hospital?*"

They all turned and looked at me.

"You're all *idiots*! A *limp*? I'll sue you. All of you! You don't deserve to practice!"

I could see Dr Haynes about to speak, but David quietly spoke first. "She's not healed up yet."

"Of course I'm not, due to your incompetence!"

"*Shut the fuck up you—*" Dr Haynes burst out but David interrupted him.

"Leave tha poor los' soul here doc. I'll heal her up all nice and friendly like. The city sucks them in and grinds them down. Hell, she's worse'n I was!"

"David, you don't have to put up with this bitch anymore!" Dr Gilson burst out.

"*Bitch?*"

"She needs ta rest here. Ya all know that. Besides, Pansy likes her."

"Pansy?" I squeaked out.

"Now shoo. All of ya shoo out of here! I'll take care of her and make her soul all nice and better."

I was trapped in the asylum and the inmates were in charge.

With that the two doctors left. David closed the door behind them, and turned to face me.

"You know that I'll find a way to escape," I said.

He ignored me and walked over, pulling the chair up beside the bed, its legs scraping on the wood, and sat down.

I just stared at him and crossed my arms over my chest.

"That there ya have wrong, Ms Reynolds. Ya can leave whenever it is that ya want."

I snorted. "Then why didn't you let them take me?"

"Ah, Ms Reynolds, or Angela.... Mind if a call ya Angela?"

I just glared.

"Well, it seems ta me that you be where I used ta be."

"Hah! Since when did *you* have wings?"

"Ya know Angela, ya can go. Abandon Pansy, the herd. I'll be here to take care of them all. Yup. Go back to your apartment from which you've been evicted. Go and keep lookin' for a job. *Or*, ya can stay here."

"And why would I want to stay *here*?"

"Got me, Angela. Hell, I don't think ya got the intelligence, or the skill, ta take care o' tha herd. I bet you're just goin' chicken out and flee back to ya city and ya city life because you're afraid. I—"

"Shut the *fuck* up! I *can* go back *whenever* I want! You *think* I can't take care of some *horses*? If *you* can do it, then I can absolutely do it!" I glared at him, eyes wide, ears pulled against my skull, breath panting in and out through my nostrils.

He didn't smell afraid. Not in the least.

"Well then Angela. If that there's tha way ya think, then," he motioned toward the door, "go and feed them. Ya'll see tha barn easily, and tha feed is clearly marked. And if'n ya need any help, there's a vast library o' books down tha hall. I'll leave the door open so'n ya can find it."

I just snorted and threw off the covers and clomped across the floor and yanked the door open, wings streaming behind me. There was a worn wooden staircase going down and an open door down the hall. I could faintly smell the warmth of old books. Well, they could wait. Feeding horses – how hard could it be? Hmph! I spun around and clomped down the stairs, wings raised behind me for balance. Yanking open the wooden

door, I shoved the screen door out of my way and clomped onto the porch.

It was late in the day, and I could smell grass, leaves, and the glowing scent of horses. The barn was easy to find and I clomped down the stairs and stomped along the path. There was a small door to the barn that was closed, and I yanked it open and ducked my way through it and stepped into the dust betwinkled dimness of the barn. It didn't take me long to find the grain – there were a number of big bins of it, each with a trough at the bottom which it slid into. Wooden buckets were beside each numbered bin, and in each trough was a plastic measuring cup.

Measuring cup? Why would you need that?

Unfortunately it was all there was so I used it to slowly fill the bucket half full – which was all I could manage to carry – and then I clomped along the well swept wood looking for the stalls. The looseboxes – large stalls with more room for the horse – weren't hard to find, arranged in rows beneath large skylights that made the little dust in the air shine and tinkle. Angrily I clomped to the first one and reached to open the door—

And saw a small picture of a horse's head, a name, and a long list of instructions for feeding and watering. A *long* list. The bucket fell from my hand and thumped on the floor as I leaned down and read. Half a cup of grain two, quarter cup of grain five, no supplement, five scoops of bin three hay. Water as required.

At the bottom it said in large, bold letters, "Remember to muck the stall first – dust is the enemy of horses!"

Maybe there was more to this than I'd thought – Well, if David could do it, I could do it!

I took the bucket back and poured the grain back into the appropriate bin, and went looking for the pitchfork. I found it, along with detailed disposal instructions, and rubber boots.

I looked down at my naked hooves. And my naked body. I was still far too angry to care about the later, so I just looked around for horse boots. By *God* he better have some! I had a pair at home that I'd picked up for the winter, but they weren't here. I didn't have to look far – beside the pitchfork neatly placed were a pair of big human rubber boots, and a pair for me.

Bastard had thought of everything! *Fine!* I'd still show him!

I put them on and grabbed the pitchfork, and stomped over and went to work.

To make a long story short, it was hard. Goddamned hard! Horse muck is *heavy*. Horse muck *stinks*. And horses make a *lot* of it. By the time I'd

finished four stalls I had to take a break, so I made my way back to the feed bins and grabbed a couple handfuls of grain from bin three for myself. I turned on the water hose and filled a bucket from which I drank deeply. Then I finished the other three looseboxes. And then I put the feed, in the exact quantities stated in the proper bins and locations, but only *after* I'd shoveled some new hay onto the floors of the looseboxes. The last thing was the water and, of course, the hose wouldn't reach far enough. So I had to do it bucket by bucket. By the time I was done, the sun was setting, the horses were at the stable entrance waiting to be let in, and I could barely move.

I stopped and stared. I'd forgotten how big horses are. Sure, I'd seen them when I was lying on the ground, but I'd expected the perspective to make them big. Now, even though I was almost seven feet tall, they *still* looked big. I swallowed nervously, afraid, and then forced it aside. David thought I couldn't care for them, did he? Well! I limped over – had I been limping before? I couldn't remember – and led each one in to their stall. They came docilely enough when I opened the door from the fields and they seemed to know where to go, though I checked the pictures to make sure. The black stallion that had neighed when I'd first arrived pushed his way in first, and the others followed in their own order. I couldn't help but smile at the fuzzy little colt, but he avoided me. After doing a last check of the looseboxes, I closed both doors. Then I grabbed some more grain for myself, took off the boots and rinsed them out and put them aside to dry, and made my way back to the house.

It was obvious that I had a lot to learn, and by *God* I'd show him that I could do it better than he could! Stupid country bumpkin....

The house doors had been closed, but not locked, so I went inside, and clomped my way upstairs to the library. Somebody – David, damn him – had put out a big bowl of apples and a comfortable seat with a slot between the back and the bottom, and a lantern. There was a book on the table beside the chair so I thought I'd start with it.

All I can say is that caring for horses is hideously complex. The book he'd left for me was very basic, so I soon abandoned it and grabbed a big heavy volume by a Dr David Milne and it went into detailed charts of the vitamin ratios for different breeds by lifestyle, along with monstrous graphs and studies.... Sheepishly, I shelved that book and went back to the one he'd left me.

I read late into the night, leaving only after reading a recommendation to leave the top half of loosebox doors open so that the horses could socialize. Panicked, I galloped down the stairs, but fortunately the loosebox doors

were open, so I limped back to the library and back to my studies. I only went to bed when I could no longer keep my eyes open, and went back to my room to find an alarm clock and posted feeding time. I'd already learned that horses liked a regular routine so I dutifully set the alarm for half an hour before morning feeding, time and crashed into slumber.

IT WENT ON LIKE THAT FOR WEEKS as I went through the daily regimen. Up early to groom myself, and then morning feeding, and then letting the horses out. Milking Pansy. Adding creep – a special food mixture – for Felena's foal Darius. Making sure Felena didn't sneak the feed that was for her foal. Keeping the water troughs full. Starting up the gas powered brush harrow and running it through the corner of the field the horses used for droppings to keep them from ruining the grass with weeds. I taught myself to brush the horses, but then found that they didn't need it as they were fine rolling in the grass. What I did have to do though was to check each hoof each evening for cracks, stones, and to clean out the mud and dirt. I knew how to do that in theory, but I learned that I hadn't been taking proper care of mine and started doing so. I also learned that none of the horses were shod, and that shoes weren't needed unless the horse spent a significant portion of its time on pavement or stone. After a week when my hooves needed trimming I took off my rubber shoes, trimmed each hoof, and then left the shoes off.

Each horse had a unique personality, and I learned to recognize their habits, just as they adapted to mine. Joxur, the lead stallion, was always strutting around like a show horse. He always wanted to be brushed, even when his hide was glossy and sleek. I brushed him the rare time I had free time. Pansy always stayed near me. She'd nudge me and try to groom me with her mouth, and she always encouraged me to take her milk directly. I did milk her with my hands into a bucket, and drank that milk, but I never again took it from her teat. White Dove was flighty and the oldest of the mares. She took the longest to trust me, and even then she was always nervous. I don't know if it was because of her pregnancy, or if that was just the way she was. Madame Pixi was a prankster, a troublemaker. She'd sneak up behind me and nip my tail, or nibble on my feathers. She just loved to make me jump. Felena always watched me, but eventually she did let me approach both her and Darius. Darius was a child, running, hopping, skipping, rolling in the mud and grass. He would walk up to me, look at me, and then flee in mock terror. Robin's Moontwist was a pig. Not literally, but she was always dirty, always had hay sticking out of her mouth on which she was nibbling. Her I had to brush every so often,

and her hooves were always the dirtiest. And finally there was Hera, the herd's matriarch. She was... overweight, and always moved with a slow and unstoppable dignity. She just looked at me and snorted, and tolerated me. Eventually they *all* accepted me, maybe because I smelled like them, and eventually they'd give way to me, even the lead stallion.

I don't think I loved the work, but I always did the best I could at any task I was given. I found the work comforting. I never had a chance to fly; instead I made sure to do a perfect job just to show David! Just to show him that I was *better* than he was!

Oddly, I never saw him during this time. Oh, he was around. The chickens were fed. The house was kept clean. Little changes were made to the instructions for the one pregnant mare, so he was around. Food was put out for me – mostly thick stews – and I supplemented the daily meal with snacks from the grains. Each grain was indeed different, with different levels of dryness and from different grasses, and I found that I preferred the barley and corn grains.

And yes, I did limp. So little that I almost never noticed it. By the end of the day with my muscles aching, it was noticeable, but I dealt with it and cursed the doctors, and cursed David. It was surprising, given how I'd landed, but then I hadn't been going *that* fast, and the ground had been soft and rock free. But still, I'd been lucky.

I *still* hated David, and I *still* was going to leave as soon as I'd proven to him, and to myself, that I could care for the horses as good or better than *he* could. My reading had given me a faint bit of insight into what was involved in the carefully listed instructions I'd found. Really, I was going to leave any time now. Really I was, though I kept putting it off as I couldn't bring myself to leave the herd—

And so it went until the night that White Dove decided to give birth.

I WAS IN THE BARN, the horses had been fed and their hooves cleaned, and I was reading one of the many books on horse care from the library. It was late, and the horses were sleeping or standing quietly, and I was about ready to go to bed. I'd been spending more and more time in the barn as it relaxed both me, and the horses.

That was when I heard a loud scream from White Dove in her stall. I stopped, ears twisting to hear. There was another scream, not as loud, but distinctive. White Dove *never* screamed.

I turned and looked. There was White Dove lying down in the hay, panting for breath, and I could see something—

It was a muzzle sticking out of her rear end, glistening inside a bag of water, like magic. Dear God—

For a second I thought about taking care of the birth myself, but I'd become painfully aware of the gap between my expertise and David's. So I swallowed my pride and galloped – flew – over to the house, screaming for David. I had no idea what time it was, but it was certainly after midnight. Clomping up the stairs, I banged on David's door.

"I think White Dove's giving birth!"

"Well, t'is about time that there mare did. Sometimes I wish that God hadna made those horses so flighty about when they felt like pushing the wee little foal out. I've been expecting this miracle to happen any old day now—"

"*Get a move—!*"

He burst out of the door before I'd finished, and almost fell down the stairs as I followed. He was only half dressed, but he had rubber boots, a coverall and a coat on. I just had my rubber flight suit.

I galloped with him back to the barn. "I donna know what ya think of me, though I hope it's improved over these last few weeks. I must admit, ya did far better than I thought ya would."

"What?"

"Do ya think ah'm so stupid as ta trust ya without supervision Angela? There be all kinds of monitoring cameras in that there barn. As long as ya did it all right, I was leavin' ya alone. Ya did fine for a city kid."

City kid? Hmph! Still, more important things were happening, and by now I'd gotten in front of him. Looking back I shouted, "Get a move on!"

"Don't ya worry yourself none there Angela – it'll be a few minutes yet. I took a look at her as I was putting on these clothes that I'd kept ready..."

I held the barn door open for him and followed after as he led the way to White Dove's loosebox. It didn't take long to reach, and things hadn't changed much. A bit more of the head was visible but that's about it. David crouched down by the foal and just watched.

"What the *hell* are you doing?"

"Nothin'."

"But—"

"Angela, horses have done this here kind o' thing for thousands upon thousands o' years. White Dove knows what she has to do. We're just here, well, in case somethin' goes wrong, and then we do what we can."

I looked down at the miracle before me. I could smell blood, sweat, horse, water, salt – but all I could watch was the glistening sack of life

slowly, ever so slowly, being squeezed out. It was like magic, even though I knew it wasn't. The water around the mare twisted and slid, catching the light in shatterings of reflections like brilliant crystal. Then David, looking worried, popped the sack, which snapped like an overstretched elastic band, and the water spilled out, exchanging one magic for the magic of the foal itself. Some owners left the sack sealed till it broke on its own, others popped it so they could make sure the foal was all right. The foal – It was coal black just like me.

White Dove looked up at me and I looked down at her, and saw a quiet confidence mixed with pain in her eyes. And, below that, a hint of loneliness, a need for comfort. Or maybe I read it in her scent. I don't know. So I crouched down and rested the chin of my muzzle along her neck, and gently ran my fingers between her ears. I know it sounds odd, but horses comfort each other by resting their heads on each other's neck and that's why I did it. White Dove turned her upper neck and head and gently lipped at my neck and at the base of my wings. Yes, I was wearing my flight suit – the only clothes I had – but I knew that she couldn't tear the material and it comforted her. Her breath was hot and passed in and out through her nostrils, sliding through the hairs of my neck.

Time passed.

"Shit—" I heard David mutter.

My heart stopped beating for a second, and I leapt up to see what was going on, wings flapping to help. Most of the foal was out now, and I could see the placenta coiled on the floor, squeezed out by the straining mare. Thick hot blood was oozing out alongside the foal and I could hear a neigh of pain and agony from White Dove.

It took me a second to figure out all that was going on, but part of it hit me even as David was grabbing the foal to yank it out.

Horse birth is different from human birth. When a foal is born, it gains its oxygen through the placenta, only losing that connection after fully birthed. Sometimes, the placenta separates prematurely depriving the foal of oxygen—

"No!"

I leapt over David, wings beating down to help me, as he finished yanking out the foal. David listened at the foal's chest and I listened at its mouth. Nothing. Nothing! I grabbed its muzzle and kissed it, pressing its muzzle against mine, and then I exhaled. I saw David press down its chest and water gurgled out of the foal's mouth and into mine, and I gagged and spit it out. Then I pressed my muzzle against its and exhaled again. And again. Breathe damn, you, *breathe!* Again and again we did it. Nothing, nothing!



Finally David stood up, eyes damp, and put his hand on my shoulder. "It's too late, Angela—"

I could see the foal clearly. It had been night black, like me, with a white star between its eyes. Exhale. I still kept trying. It was my fault. Exhale. Something I'd done wrong. Some little damn thing that I'd done wrong. Exhale. Me! But I'd been left in charge, unwatched, unguided. Exhale. *How the fuck could David have done that? How could he have trusted me?* Exhale. Tears filled my eyes. God damn him! God damn him to fucking hell!

And then a miracle happened. The foal coughed, blood and spit gurgled out of its mouth, and it breathed. *By God it breathed!*

I hugged the foal, felt it struggling to move; through tears I watched its eyes flicker open and look at me.

Then I remembered something – the foal needed to bond with the mother. Why had David let me stay near? Tears in my eyes, I forced myself up, tore my sight away from the glistening blackness of the foal.

And only then did I notice the stench of blood and death in the air, and the thick steaming blood pooled on the floor.

Oh no—

I looked at White Dove and she looked at me, eyes pale and dim. She nickered gently. Was she asking me to take care of her foal? Her breath gurgled, I saw blood speckling her muzzle.

And then she breathed her last.

"No! No! No, no, no!"

"Angela, ya have to be strong right here, right this minute! The foal needs you, the living need you. I'll get a rag over here and some warm water so that ya can wash off its afterbirth, but ya have to be there for the wee creature. Let it stand on its own. Just be quiet. I'll bring milk too, a bottle. When it's ready to feed then ya'll know."

I just nodded, numbly, seeing the world through the wavering water of tears, as the foal struggled to stand, its head weaving to try and keep itself balanced. Oh God, I wanted to help, but I trusted David—

By the time David came back, the foal was shakily standing on its four legs, cute, fuzzy, helpless, tender, needy. It pressed its muzzle against mine seeking milk, and I suddenly felt a warm bottle in my hand and held the nipple towards the foal. I fell to my knees and it found the bottle and began suckling.

It was so beautiful. So small, so tiny, so helpless—

"Angela," David whispered. "It's a he, a colt. And ya saved it."

I saved it. Me. I did. Me. But poor White Dove—

As it greedily sucked at the bottle, I let it rest its chin on my lap. Leaning

forward, I breathed in its scent of blood and water and salt and life. I felt a warm rag in my hand and began rubbing it against the colt's hide, wiping off the blood and salt, wiping off the afterbirth, wiping off the last of its mother. Freeing it from her shadow, warming and drying it as it suckled. I could smell a hint of iodine, but all my attention was on the colt, and all the colt's on me.

Finally we curled up together and slept, my wings wrapped around us both to hide my colt, to hide me, from the death outside.

DR HAYNES CAME THE NEXT MORNING and checked the colt and could find nothing wrong. A miracle. To the colt, I was his mother. It followed me everywhere. Copying Felena I would nuzzle it, nibble at its neck, along its back. A month ago I'd have been horrified by what I was doing, but now it felt right. The colt was a horse, and I was part of what it was. It deserved the best care I could give it.

It deserved everything I could give it.

I lived in the barn, sleeping with him, keeping him warm and safe. Keeping the herd warm and safe. It seemed that somehow I'd become the alpha horse, even though I was female. Figure that one out.

David quietly took over most of the chores, and I let him. Proving my skill didn't matter any more, all that did was the colt. He was demanding, but he also let me have time alone as he just leaned against me, learning about the wide world around him. I would gently scratch his ears, taking the time to think. I had a lot to think about.

It was almost a week before David came to talk to me. He touched me lightly as the colt slept, and I just nodded and carefully stood up and moved away.

Yes, we had to talk and I was finally ready.

I followed him out towards the grain bins. Pansy softly nickered as I went by and I nickered back. The horses had grown on me. He motioned towards one old wooden stool and I sat on it as he sat on the other.

"Angela, Dr Haynes says that tha colt should be fine. There's no way ta be certain. There might yet be some brain damage; it all depends on how long the placenta was detached."

I nodded, blinking tears from my eyes as I remembered White Dove.

"And now comes tha question of what we're going to do with you, little Angela."

I snorted – I towered over him. "I'm not leaving."

"Ach, I never said you'd have ta, and I'd never do that to a carin' woman such as yourself."

"You're that Dr David Milne that wrote some of the books in your library, aren't you?"

"That was who I used ta be, a long time ago."

"I've been a real bitch to you, haven't I?"

He nodded.

I looked down at him, blinking tears of sorrow and embarrassment out of my eyes. "Why did you help me?"

"I couldna leave a poor broken thin' lyin' in ma field now, could I?"

"No, not then. Later. You could have let me go home."

"Ah, that ya have wrong Angela. There was too much of the old me that I could see in ya. I used ta be like ya – workin' hard, snappin' and fightin' me way ta tha top of ma profession. T'was a cruel and hard world that was. But I was at tha top!"

"Top of what?"

"Veterinary medicine Angela. Oh, not tha pets and crap ya run inta in tha city – horse racin'! That's where tha *real* money was. The stories of ma days there that I could tell ya – t'would raise tha hair on ya spine they would. There was no love, just seein' how much that ya could get away with under tha eyes o'tha inspectors. Fakin' tha genetics, steroids that had ta be flushed before tha race, bribes – Sure, most o'tha owners were honest, mostly, but when ya get to tha million dollar purses petty little things like that there morality just get tossed out tha window."

I watched him in rapt fascination, ears focused on his voice. This was something that I'd never even thought of. Sure, I'd hacked into some systems when asked to, cracked some software when I needed it and couldn't get it otherwise, but I was more honest than a lot of people I knew. You'd have thought I'd have known that computers weren't the only profession which corruption had tainted.

"I used ta get five hundred grand ta fake results, ta slip false records of breeding and ancestors. Thoroughbred racin' is not a sport, t'is a prestige game amongst the owners. So many people think that any half decent horse can compete, but t'is never been like that. A horse is only allowed to compete if it can trace its whole ancestry back ta either tha Darley Arabian, the Byerley Turk, or the Godolphin Arabian. If a horse doesn't have its lineage documented for all those generations back to the 18th century, then t'aint no Thoroughbred and t'aint no way it can race.

"Or at least that's tha theory...."

"Anyway Angela, I was way more than shoulder deep in that there filth, takin' money, bribes, payoffs, doctorin' records and drug tests, and still I pushed ma way higher and higher, or maybe I should have said deeper

and deeper, into those there filthy depths. Hell, I even had a heart attack at thirty. Not a bad one, but still t'was a sign. I just put it off and dove back in, reapin' in tha money and dark fame, gainin' prestige.

"Fortunately I had friends. Doctor Haynes, and others, dragged me out o'there kickin' and screamin' like you've been. They near imprisoned me at an old run down farm and I had to take care of all them there horses. They left me, without phone, radio, car.... Just a well stocked house and that there needy herd.

"Horses donna take care o' themselves Angela. Ya know that now. Wild ones do, but these here were never wild. They had ta be watched, groomed, cleaned, fed, watered.... T'was almost an entire week before I dragged meself out of me funk and fed and watered them. They were naught but skin and bones by then.

"Angela, them there horses brought me out of madness. Ah had to care for them – what was left of ma morality, nay soul, couldna let them suffer so ah stayed and brought them back. And in return they brought me back.

"And then ya came, and I saw before me another lost soul, a poor leetle one who was goin' down tha same path. If t'wasn't for Pansy I'd have let the doc take ya. But she see's ya soul and I'm obligated ta her to try and bring it back."

I just looked at him, his words sinking through my anger, my pain, my guilt. "You trusted me with the horses – *how the fuck could you do that?* I didn't know a Goddamned thing about them!"

"Angela, I trusted ya, but I also watched ya. Do ya remember when I said I'd checked White Dove...?"

And then I knew. Oh God, but I knew.... "*You idiot! I killed her!* It was something I did. Something I did *wrong*. It was my fault! *Mine!* Something—"

"Angela, sometimes these things just happen."

"No!" I swallowed. "Don't you *dare* try and take the responsibility away from me! It was my *fucking* fault!"

"Angela, ya did nothing that I wouldna have done. Nothing!"

Through quivering lips I spat out my response. "And how the *hell* do you know that!"

"Angela, I had this here barn wired years ago 'cause I couldna be here all the time. I watched, and I made sure you did things the right way, tha way things have ta be done. Donna worry, if ya'd screwed up, I'd have been here 'fore ya could say three words! The first night ya closed the upper doors and I came in later and opened them. I know because I watched ya in the

barn. At first ya hated the task, but ya refused to do it less than perfectly. There is nothing ya did that could have caused it!"

"It *had* to be me! It *had* to be!"

He stood up and walked over and hugged me tightly. "Child, t'was fate. Nothin' more, nothin' less. *Nothin'* ya did could have caused that! She was old. It was her time. It—"

"Then why? *Why the fuck did she die?*" I fell into his grasp, sobs racking my body as the pain, the guilt I'd bottled up ever since she'd died poured out of me. "Why? Why...?"

He rocked me back and forth for a long time, his strong body holding my frail one as I shook and wailed. After a long while he spoke. "Angela, I donna know why she died. As to the how, Dr Haynes examined her – something broke in her womb as she was givin' birth. The birth was taking too long and I worried. I was close to panic, but I drew strength from you, yes *you*, and White Dove. And then ya acted. I donna think I could have saved the colt, but you did."

"*Why?*"

"I donna know. She was old. It was her time. She had to go to heal ya. It just happened. Ya have to find your own answer to that, Angela."

"But it's so hard—!"

"I know, I know.... All any of us upon this Earth can do is to go on—"

Sniffling I nodded, and then whispered, "Go on...." I paused and then whispered to myself, my voice unsteady at first, but drawing strength from the words I remembered between Delenn and Sinclair. "Why Babylon 5? If the first four stations were sabotaged or destroyed, why build another? Because if we value something, we rebuild it. If it's destroyed we rebuild it again, and again."

I stood up, unsteady on my two hooves. My voice was quiet, but steady, firm. It was hard to get out, I was afraid to ask because I was afraid of the answer. I had a duty, I had to honour a memory. And I had a herd that needed me. "David, can I stay?"

He nodded. "As long as ya wishes. Though ya'll have to help out with tha herd—"

Relief filled me. Relief, happiness, joy, pleasure... but most of all, satisfaction.

I nodded and hugged him, squeezing him tight, sobbing. Not with pain or hatred, but with satisfaction and joy.

THERE'S NOT MUCH MORE TO TELL beyond that. It took some legal

wrangling as I'd been gone over a month, but I got my stuff from my apartment. I got the farmhouse connected for wireless satellite Internet, and got a phone – for emergencies only. David and I became friends, not anything more. We were too different, but we loved enough of the same things to admire each other. The colt – I named him Sinclair – grew strong and healthy. I learned to ride him. It wasn't the same as flying, but it had its own joy. And yes, I did fly again – the only thing the crash left me was a slight limp. I would fly above Sinclair, calling him to go faster and faster, as fast as he could. When he was tired he'd collapse and I'd land and we'd nibble each other....

Xanadu was over a decade ago now. I'm still with the horses, they take most of the time. And I do some work from contacts on line – mostly sewing clothes for those with wings like me. Not much, but it helps keep me busy. There just aren't enough of us to create a commercial demand.

And yes, Xanadu changed my soul. It changed all of us. It changed the world.

Was it a good change? I don't know. For me, in the end, it was. Not directly. It just created a possibility, a potential, to save my soul. And I thank the universe every day that it happened. It's caused me pain, turmoil, destruction.

And it's caused love, and joy, and it's widened my horizons, all of our horizons. It's redefined what it means to be human, made it wider, made it more glorious.

At first I didn't want to write anything for this ten year anniversary, but I was asked by Time, as were all of us victims, survivors, heroes. David helped me remember the pain, the glory, the healing. I could have gone on, and probably died of a heart attack at thirty-five. Instead, with his help, I finally learned to fly free!

## XANADU: UNICORN DREAMS

THERE WAS A CHRISTMAS TREE on the kitchen table.

It hadn't been there five minutes ago when he'd staggered awake and through the kitchen to the washroom. He hadn't bought one for years. It'd been so easy a decade ago. He could dream of magic, secure in the knowledge that there was no such thing. He could write about it. He'd even sold a novel, and there was talk of a sequel. He wasn't rich, but it had been enough, and with the promise of more.

And then Xanadu had happened. And magic was *real* and alive in the world. And it had left Edward behind.

He hadn't had enough when he was well off to afford any of the actual mages who'd sprung up. And with magic *real* the so-called fantasy market collapsed. And with it his dreams. And his writing. He hadn't written a word in years. He hadn't dreamed—

Dreams hurt too much.

So *what* was a Christmas tree doing on the table? It hadn't been there last night. He *knew* that. Had it been there when he'd woken up? He couldn't say. But now—

It wasn't a big tree, just a tiny one that would have done Charlie Brown proud. Yet, unlike the comic character's, the needles were rich and green, the tree alive and growing. It was even in a small clay pot, one more than large enough to support it to an eventual replanting. Its scent was rich, sweet pine with the promise of future life.

And, beneath the tree, was a present.

He blinked. It was a dream, it had to be. He *knew* he didn't have a tree! Was he going mad? And yet... the tree was real.

With a shaking hand he reached out and touched a bough of soft needles. They hissed against each other as the branch moved slightly at his touch. The scent was richer. Letting go, the branched wiggled back, and he reached down and touched the present. It was solid, the paper warm and slick under his finger, the ribbon a bright ivory around white paper that tickled his touch. There was a card.

He pulled the box out. It was heavy, and something sloshed inside. The card almost fell into his hand and he lifted it, opening it to read what was inside. A simple inscription in a swirling scrolling hand he *knew* he'd never seen before. But it was easy to read:

FOR THE MAGIC

Tossing it down, he fled, leaving the tree behind, leaving the magic he'd once held in his mind, he'd once put on the page, behind. He threw himself onto the bed sobbing. It creaked underneath.

After a while he shoved the pain, the agony, the dreams he'd lost, the whisper of his soul that had abandoned him years before, aside, and went and showered. He ignored the tree, ignored the present. Then he got dressed and went to his minimum wage job like all the other mind-dead drones... lost in banality.

FOR THREE DAYS HIS LIFE CONTINUED. Studiously, carefully, he ignored the tree and the present. As he always did once he got home, he sat at the computer and stared at the blank screen. From long memory he rewrote the last paragraph he'd ever written, hoping it would break the dam. As always, it didn't. He typed in a dry meaningless account of his day... an account with nothing but empty plain words that had no meaning, no dreams. Even yesterday when one of the superheroes Xanadu had spawned had halted a police chase in front of him by lifting the chased car into the air and off towards the station.... All he could write about it was short simple sentences. A chase. A car. A superhero. A resolution.

And then he *saw* the tree again. Not in any magic inspiring way. He just became aware of its existence. Of its needles drying out. Of its life dying drop by drop. He filled a glass with water and carefully poured it into the little pot, pushing the present aside so he wouldn't spill.

The present.

What could it hurt?

In small neat motions he untied the ribbon and folded it neatly. He slit the neat pieces of tape with a knife and unfolded the paper to get it off, and then folded it back. There was a box, plain white cardboard. Inside was dry



straw, faintly smelling of spice and dirt. Cradled on it was a little bottle full of liquid. His hands trembling, he picked it up. A bubble oozed along the glass as he twisted it side to side. The top would screw off, but was sealed in wax. And there was only a plain white label, with only a handful of words in that same beautiful script that had been on the card:

#### UNICORN DREAMS

He stared. *Stared*. And then he screamed, screaming out his anguish, and throwing the bottle onto the floor where it clattered and rolled, the liquid gurgling inside. And then he fled to clean, to dust, to write meaningless words. And then to sleep and dream forgotten dreams, and then to wake up and go to work.

DAYS PASSED. WEEKS, MONTHS. Each day he gave the tree a little water. Each day it grew a little greener, a little bigger. The box was tossed in the recycle bin along with its pretty wrapping. And his banal life continued day by day. He kicked the bottle early one morning, stubbing his toe against the cold glass. Somehow his throwing it away hadn't broken it, the same way his kicking it so that it rumbled across the floor and clinktinked against the wall hadn't cracked the glass. He picked it up, pain throbbing from his toe. The label was as white as it had been, and the writing just as mocking.

Only to avoid more pain did he put it on the counter out of the way.

AFTER A LONG COLD WINTER spring finally burst forth. The last of the snow melted, and the plants burst into green.

He had no garden, just a strip of gravel strewn dirt along the sidewalk. He'd always thought about doing something with it, but never had. Early on one of his days off he picked up a small garden shovel at a garage sale, and some good dirt from the grocery store. Digging the gravel and garbage and bits of glass from a little spot by his front door, he poured in some of the rich dirt he'd bought. As though it was made of glass, he pried the little tree out of its pot, putting its little ball of soil in the hole, and then filling said hole with the rest of what he'd bought.

The tree looked so small and defenceless. Given its proximity to the sidewalk and the road, he gave it a day. And yet – and yet it *seemed* right. And... and the tree couldn't stay in the pot forever. He watered it and left.

Day by day it survived and grew. Bottles were tossed into the little strip of dirt that was all he had, but never around the tree. Garbage was kicked against the house wall, and people stomped on the little strip of stone-strewn dirt.

But the little tree was never touched.  
Every day he watered it, and every day it grew a little more. In a sense  
it was a miracle. Maybe it was magic.  
But his soul was still empty.

IT WAS A HOT JULY DAY. Not hot, *blistering*. He'd just watered the tree. Had  
it actually thanked him? Nah. Impossible. Going inside, he checked the  
fridge for something cold to drink. Nothing. Nothing....

...except a little glass bottle.

He didn't even recognize it until he'd opened it and unscrewed the  
top. The water – if it *was* water – smelled of lilacs and pine and crystal  
clear water and salt and... and *everything* not man-made. That was when  
he recognized the bottle. Recognized, and *remembered*. He hadn't put it  
in the fridge! And yet—

His throat was dry. And it *was* open.

He took a sip, rolled it against his tongue. It was water. Water that tasted  
of innocence and nature and purity and freshness and oak trees hanging  
over and quiet happy life and – it was the purest, most perfect, water he'd  
ever tasted.

He downed the bottle in five swallows. After tossing it into the recycle  
bin, he sat back at his computer. A hot muggy afternoon, an empty  
screen....

But it didn't *remain* empty!

The words poured out of him, flooded onto the screen. The story of  
a Xanadu victim become unicorn, of his despair at what the world had  
become, and of his sacrifice to bring dreams and magic back. Writing it,  
it was like it shoved its way out of his soul and burned its way onto the  
screen. Like he was watching an unfolding movie, but more. He could  
smell the foulness that was humanity. His heart burned and tore with  
the emotions of the unicorn, the creature that Xanadu had brought into  
existence destroying the man who had gone before like a blast furnace  
would destroy a leaf.

In two hours the story was done.

Following Heinlein's Rules, he proofed it once, looked up an online  
e-zine he knew of that paid a few pennies for Xanadu fiction, and submit-  
ted it.

An hour later they offered to buy it.

It was only for \$5, but – it was the first thing, the *only* thing, in years.

For the first time in *ages* he went to bed happy... even looking forward  
to the next day.

THE NEXT DAY HE STARTED ON an actual novel. Another Xanadu victim, but this time he became a Celtic myth, a white stag. He researched the old Celtic and Gaelic and Welsh stories, and got into the three-part rhythm as he told a tale of a life, and who it touched, and how it ended. If there was one thing the agent he'd had – and he guessed he still had – had hammered into him after his one novel, it was that *publishers like sequels*. This time he made *sure* that any of the lives touched by the stag could be made into a novel – if the publisher wanted.

It took him over a year of poking at it in his time off, letting the words flow out in what time he had. He'd polished the first three chapters and tossed them to his agent – he *was* still on file – and said agent had been enthusiastic after he'd read it. The agent had said he was worried it was plagiarism, given the long dryspell, but the style was recognizable.

As he worked and wrote, he passed the little tree each day. It was still doing fine, though it wasn't as little. Rich and green, growing in rich black soil, admired – but left untouched – by those who passed by it. When he came in from work on Christmas Day with the novel half done, he'd have sworn there was a little star on top twinkling away, but when he'd looked carefully it was gone.

It was summer by the time he had the thing done; a British publisher was interested and wanted to see the whole thing. There were advantages to having had a novel published – you were a known property that could make money. He still had the file cabinet full of rejection slips from before.... As to his writing, he fell into his usual bored depression after finishing a project, but this time it lasted nowhere near as long.

As it always had, his mind got better, and he began working on the outline for one of the characters the stag had touched – a rabbit.

In late October he got word that the publisher was willing to buy. An advance of twenty thousand, to be deducted from his royalties as was standard. Or, he got at least *twenty grand*, more once his royalties exceeded that amount.

That night he went out to party. Well, if going to a local bar and getting stinking drunk alone with endless chicken wings and some football game on television could be called a party. He'd made arrangements with the bar keep to send him home, and he managed to make it to his bed.

The next day he didn't get up until noon, and when he did it was with a pounding headache and a dry, scratchy throat. It was too early to get up! So, what had awakened him?

Something banged on the door. Again. He heard a muffled voice.

Cursing, he whipped a bathrobe on over his pajamas and stomped

through the house to answer the noise. At least it was summer. He ripped the door open just as the mailman was leaving.

“Registered delivery. You need to sign for it.”

He blinked. “But—”

“Just sign.” He handed over an heavy electronic thing and Edward signed on the screen where indicated. A thick envelope was shoved into his hand and the courier left even as Edward closed the door and pushed his way to the kitchen. He wasn’t going to sleep now, so he might as well see what it was. A knife was required to get through all the cardboard, but inside was a thin pamphlet. A ticket fell out as he pulled it out.

*Congratulations! You’ve won an all-expenses-paid tour of the Amazon!* blared out at him from the front of the booklet.

He rubbed his eyes, and then went and got a drink of water. Gulping it down, he felt a bit better as he sat down to read more.

It was a free trip, a chartered tour of the Amazon. He’d tour the river, visit ruins in the mountains, generally have a good time. Or so it was claimed.

For a moment Edward thought it was a scam, or thought he should just give it away. Checking the ticket, he called the airline and confirmed the reservation. And it was free. Why not go? It wasn’t until December, but the price was right.

He hadn’t been on a vacation in years....

EDWARD HAD TO GET A PASSPORT, and get time off, and get everything ready, but there was no problem achieving that. As usual, it was bedlam at the airport, but he managed to board just in time. The jet landed in Brasilia. Exiting it was like walking into molasses, the heat and humidity was so hot and thick. Not to mention the salt from the ocean, and the smog that billowed over everything. An overnight stay, and then onto the charter plane. Next was a week boat cruise further inland, with extensive lectures of the river’s wildlife and ecology. Fascinating stuff. The writer in him drank it up, already thinking of scenes he could use, if he could figure a way to sneak them into the plot he was working on. Edward even wrote a few up – one day he’d find a story for them, or not. The boat trip ended and he moved to another chartered plane and started touring the ruins. Fascinating stuff. The heat wasn’t so bad, though the less said about the bugs the better, not to mention the oozing mud that clung to his boots like thick clay. The group that survived to the final stage wasn’t large, only twenty people. Edward didn’t talk much, just took notes and pictures and typed – he’d picked up a laptop especially for this trip – and there was another quiet one, though she sketched to pass the time.

It was December twenty-fourth when he reached the last site. Given the date, there was a small party in the evening, and there'd be the tour on the twenty-fifth. After that, the plane would leave for Brasilia on the twenty-sixth, then the jet, and then he'd be home again.

And yet... the closer he got to the last stop, the more nervous he became. Something was *wrong*, and he had no idea what. The landing was rough, the runway short and only barely paved. Upon exit the air was cool and clear, filled with the smells of vibrant greenery and rot. He'd seen so *many* ruins that these, even though in not too bad shape, were just more of the same. And yet... he needed *something*. But what?

Edward had no idea why he found himself at the desk of the time on-site office, asking to rent a truck. He'd run directly there *right* after the plane had landed and *still* was somehow beaten by the artist girl. She was leaving just as he got there. Edward couldn't *say* why he needed the truck. When the bored clerk asked, all that he could come up with was that he needed to be away for a day, alone. And it *was* true. He *knew* he had to drive out into the wilderness. Normally there were three trucks but one was down for maintenance, and one was taken. Damn that girl! Before he knew what he'd done, he'd talked them into renting him the last vehicle, the one they'd wanted to keep in case of emergency. It'd taken all the money he had left on him as a bribe. Why?

He didn't know.

Well, it was done. And, he might as well take advantage of it.

He didn't sleep that night, couldn't sleep. It wasn't the thin air, or the scents, or the night sounds. Visions danced just at the edge of consciousness. Turning and tossing, he couldn't find a position that made any difference. At four, he surrendered. After showering and getting dressed, he picked up the keys. They warned him not to go before dawn, but he could feel *something* calling him. He had to give them the rest of his traveler's cheques as collateral, along with his credit card number, even though they already had it. Part of him wondered if he'd ever see any of it again. But then, did it matter? He didn't know why, but he *had* to do this, and he'd never have another chance. This was the last stop. Besides, he still had his tickets home.

One way was as good as another, and he chose upward. Edward didn't drive like a madman – it would be the ultimate irony in a story for him to drive off a cliff the day before he was to go home. This was Edward's *life*. So he drove slowly and cautiously, all the lights he had shoving their way through the darkness to illuminate the dirt track. It changed to gravel, and the overarching trees fell to brush, and then broken and shattered rock.

On his right the face rose higher and higher, twisted sheets of limestone shoved up out of their beds eons ago. On his left the ground fell steeper and steeper. Oh, it never became a cliff, just a steep slope that would be just as suicidal to start rolling down. Just not as Hollywood dramatic.

The sun dawned on his left; the reddish glare almost blinding him. He had to stop and wait for the sun to rise high enough that he could see. This was stupid! But – but he *had* to go. The *need* filled him. He couldn't go back. Half an hour was the most he could make himself delay before getting back in the battered dusty truck and coaxing the engine back into grinding operation. Five miles. Ten miles. The road grew more rugged, scattered with shards of rock as it followed along the slope rising higher and higher. Once the sun was rising behind him, he sped up more than his mind liked, but less than his heart demanded. It was past noon; he'd climbed who knew how high from where he'd started. The road was shambles, but still drivable.

Turning a corner, he saw arching over him a cliff of sheer granite. From far above tumbled water, almost all mist by the time it pattered against the plateau he was on. The road stayed near the edge of the slope, but there was a crack in the face that glistened in the sun. Rich greenery grew throughout, and a small pool collected the dripping water from the cliff face and falling mist. Wipers were needed to keep the windshield clear. Spilling over into a jagged crack was a pool, its runoff passing under the road – a bunch of metal sheets covered it – and then bounding and jumping and hopping down the cliff to the jungle below.

Stopping, with a creak, a rattle, and a wheeze, he let the engine clatter to its eventual halt. He could hear the hot metal popping beneath the droplets, the clinkclink of water down the slope, and the faint hiss of wind and chatter of birds below. Almost afraid, he got out, leaving the door hanging open. The suspension creaked as his weight left it. This was the place—

The place? Why the hell had he *had* to come *here*?

He looked at the grass, he looked at the still pinging truck, at the slope, at the jungle below. It was like something he'd seen before, but he'd never been here in his life! Reaching down, he untied his boots and pulled them off and put them in the truck. The same with his socks. This was stupid! Against everything he'd been told. And yet, it was *right*. He stepped across the painful gravel with his naked feet, and onto the cool grass.

This grass felt different than any he'd felt before. More alive. More *real*. And the stream, and the water – he looked up – then he *knew*. *Knew!* Knew that far above was the pool burned into his mind. The pool from first story he'd written after Xanadu.

Where the unicorn had gone to die.

He stepped over to the pool and leaned down, his jeans getting soaked and stained with water and greenery. Cupping the clean water in his hands, he raised it to his lips, and sipped.

The scent of greenery filled him. Life. Pureness. The release of dreams and the hope of wonder.

He remembered the bottle under the tree. The taste when he'd drunk it. But this... this.... It wasn't right. So close....

Water dribbling down his chin, he looked up and *knew* that the water that'd come with the little tree had come from the original spring way up there. Stepping forward, he strained to get a better look, his feet disappearing beneath the water, sinking into the rich ooze below. It was cool and relaxing, comfortable, refreshing. The water washed away his cares, filling him with hope and life.

He wanted to get up there, but how? And should he? He felt it calling, but also felt its privacy. Felt it wasn't for him. It didn't make—

The roar of an engine burst around the bend from further down the road. Who the hell? And why *now*? What was he going to do? And yet, had he done anything wrong?

Another truck grumbled along the road and stopped behind his. Its door groaned open and a figure walked out, silhouetted in the sun. Edward didn't know what to do. But, somehow, the water gave him strength. Standing there, he waited. Boots crunched on the ground, stopping at the edge of the road. A cloud slid in front of the sun and the glare faded until Edward could see.

It was the girl, the artist.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Umm... hello." She looked embarrassed.

His eyes slid down her form cataloguing with the mind of an author. She was young. Early twenties he'd guess. Well dressed, but not excessively. She wore a fedora, a white cotton shirt, dirty now and splattered with water-streaked dust. She wore beige canvas pants that went down until they were tucked into her boots. Those were finely made, beadwork and Celtic designs worked along their rim. And—

She coughed, breaking the spell. A long silence, before both spoke as one: "Did you get a...." They stopped, looking away. Both started again. "Christmas tree—"

In the silence Edward pointed to her and then put a hand over his mouth. Words just didn't seem right.

Her voice wasn't the sweet melody of myth and story, but a human

voice. Slightly higher than perfect, and with some slurred vowels. "Two years ago I found a little Christmas tree, and under it a bottle of water. After drinking the water.... I got...."

He nodded. "I... well... the same."

"I hadn't drawn in years."

"I hadn't written in years."

"Then I drew the unicorn facing off against the iron beast—"

"The steam shovel."

"She nodded."

He knew then that she'd seen the unicorn in her mind, just as he'd in his when he'd written that first story. "I'd like a copy."

"I can make you a print."

"Thanks." His legs were starting to get cold, but he didn't want to move.

"I wrote a story, a short story, about a unicorn, a pool—"

"I dreamed it. Could I get a copy?"

"Sure. And I wrote a novel—"

"I got a contract. For a cover. It was weird – I'd sent out a portfolio, just to get on their file, and then they called me. An unknown! It's for a new fantasy novel called *The White Stag of Xanadu*."

*The White Stag*— He stared. And then started laughing. A loud and joyous and *right* sound as he shook his head.

Putting her hands to her waist as the cloud slid away from in front of the sun, its renewed light haloing her head in its short hair, she glared. "What's so funny?"

"Is— Is it by Edward Derksen?"

"Yes!"

He snickered. "Hi. Edward Derksen, author. Pleased to make your acquaintance. And you are?"

He couldn't see her face other than as a shadow, but he knew she was blinking, her mouth opening and closing as she tested response after response. "Umm.... Hello. Amber Quisselle, artist. I guess we've already kinda met." She paused, and looked up, pointing. "Do you think...?"

"I *know* the pool is up there. And whatever is left of *him*."

"I *know*. I enjoyed the book."

"Oh. Thank you. I was afraid.... Well.... There are horror stories of artists never reading the book they illustrate. I haven't even seen proofs of the cover yet."

"I sent in my three proposals just before taking this vacation. I haven't heard back yet."

"I— I'm sure I'll like them all."



"I'm sure."

"I.... Oh, hell!" he burst out. "Take those boots off and come in. We can watch the sunset. The water—"

"Is it?"

"No." He sighed. "It's up there," he pointed up the cliff. "But this is close. And... somehow... it.... Well.... It feels right."

Walking back, she hopped up and sat on the seat of her truck, unlacing her boots and pulling them off, and then her clean white socks. He just watched. Tossing them in the truck with a *clunk-clunk* sound, she walked towards him.

"This is nice." Stopping, she looked into the water.

"Take a drink. Come in. Rest your feet."

Nodding, she crouched down, cupping the water and gulping it. "This is nice, but—"

"Not the same. That's up...." he pointed.

She nodded, stepping in. "It's cold!"

He nodded.

"But.... we could build a spa here. Sell tickets. This.... It's...."

"No spa."

"Of course not! But—"

"Do you think—"

"Of course not!"

She stopped and he found himself holding her hand. It was warm, splattered with water that squeezed between their palms. In any novel he *knew* they'd kiss, swear undying love, and live happily ever after. But – this wasn't a myth, this was life. And....

Amber broke the silence. "Okay – I'll bite. I have to. The unicorn, *he* was real. Xanadu made it happen. And *he*... *he* did what he could. But why us? Why here? Why now?"

He shrugged. "Got me. Real life doesn't work like storybooks. *He* gave up his life to bring dreams and magic back to the world. Well, Xanadu brought the magic. I guess *he*, us, are bringing back the dreams. Through my writing, your artistry—"

She pulled her hand out of his. "Fine! But—"

"Why? I don't know! But here.... I can take a guess. Today's Christmas."

She laughed. "So it is!"

He felt his muse singing in his soul. Or was it the unicorn. Did it even matter? "Two years ago we got a gift. We got back what we'd lost and couldn't find. Maybe what he left behind found it, helped us. Maybe it's

*using* us. I don't know how much of what I write is true, and how much I make up. I doubt I'll ever know.

"But, it brings dreams. It brings magic into homes. It whispers to the child in us. Why did we have to come here? I don't know. Maybe to prove *he* was real. Maybe the water here, the grass, it's all a sign, a reminder, of what *he* was so we'd never forget why. Dreams made real as proof that *his* dreams existed. That they've come back, small, weak, but able to grow given time and help.

"There are probably others. Already, or later. We'll know each other. We can help each other... keep *his* legacy alive."

She nodded.

"But, as we, as they, come here to see the proof, they'll find that they don't need it." A warmth filled his soul. All his life he'd quested after magic, been cheated by Xanadu. And yet... the magic had always been there. Inside him. Part of him. It had needed some help, but that was it. A *gift* he could share with all. "Magic exists, and the world knows it, but doesn't *believe* it. We know. We know and we *believe*. And we'll share."

She nodded. They both looked up through the mist at the spring the *knew* existed, at the *grave* far above. Soon they'd go home, go their own ways, share what that Christmas gift had given them. They'd stay in contact, but each would grow. Each would share the dreams, the magic.

Each would change the world.

And, each would know, as would all the others who came after, that once, *once*, there had been a unicorn—

## GURGLEBUDDIES

THE MEETING COULDN'T BE about the rumours. They couldn't be true! Couldn't! He chewed a bit on his mouthpiece, floating in his room, the only sound the *gurgle-gurgle* of the oxygenated perfluorocarbon he was breathing as his chest heaved it in and out. In his mind echoed the oath they had all sworn as pilots, the oath of their guild. *Guide your ship home.*

"I see you've finally joined us, Skalni." The commandant spoke to all, but to the uplift squirrel in particular. He was human and had been a pilot. At least until he'd converted back to air breathing almost a decade ago.

Skalni wanted to chitter back something, anything. He'd been asleep, he'd been busy. *Anything* that kept his mind off what the meeting might be about. But, as if reading his mind, the commandant motioned him through the screen to silence. The squirrel just nibbled more on his mouthpiece, liquid gurgling up and down the tube.

"As you've all probably heard, the *Pegasus* has been overdue. The latest courier just arrived from *Faint Hope* confirming she'd failed to arrive as of a week ago."

Skalni felt his heart skip a beat, the liquid curdling thick in his lungs. No— No....

"We do not abandon our brothers and sisters! I have the *Pegasus* jump entry details from Sol jump station. Given that, I'm asking for volunteers for an attempted tracking."

Even as Skalni pressed the *aye* button on his keyboard with a shaking paw, a counter flashed in the top left corner of the screen. Seventeen. The current pilot complement at Sol.

"We will guide our ship home. Always. We swear by that, we live by that, and, sometimes, we *die* by that. A rescue ship is being prepared; minimal crew, extra supplies. Skalni Jacobson has volunteered, and as Meynar's last apprentice, he has first right. I thank you all for your offer, and will keep you informed." The light on Skalni's display changed from green to blue, indicating a private channel. "Skalni?"

Yes— Or at least Skalni tried to say that. The breathing liquid gurgled in his throat, but no sound came out. Something to distract him. Anything to distract him. He'd forgotten the electrodes for his throat so he could speak.

Skalni fished around for them floating in the liquid he lived in, he found them still plugged into the sealed laptop. Meanwhile the Commandant continued, "This can't have been easy for you."

Skalni stuck the electrodes onto his bare skin, the hair follicles removed during his conversion operation.

"You don't have to do this. Yes, honour asks it, but, you have to ask yourself, *are you the best one for the job?*" The commandant looked through the screen, staring at him with all the power of command. "You have to be sure. Absolutely sure. For Meynar, for your ship, for your crew."

Skalni closed his eyes, forcing back tears, gnawing down on his mouth-piece. He would be strong. He *had* to be strong! "I— I'm sure, sir."

"This is only your third trip. I know you have the right. I know you have an attachment, a feeling, a recent contact. That may help—"

His eyes flashed open. "Sir!"

"Skalni, I know. I *had* to ask. But—"

"I will bring his ship home, sir."

"I know you will. A crew is ready to take you to a shuttle for immediate launch. Good hunting."

"Thank you, sir."

The screen faded to black and Skalni just floated there. Pulling the electrodes from his throat, he pinched his eyes shut. Days of hearing the rumours, days of denying them. And now – now, confirmation.

He curled up in a ball, naked rat-like tail wrapped around him. He missed his squirrel tail, missed curling up in its warm fur. But, the tail was the price. The price of a pilot. A pilot had to be strong, always. Confident, always. And, always *certain*.

But now, in private, Skalni let the walls he'd erected fall. Weeks of worry, of fear, all that he'd held back, burst out. The squirrel uplift sobbed, a silent wracking sadness that shook his body, that made the regular gurgle of his breathing liquid a shaken rattle.

THROUGHOUT THE LONG BOOST past Neptune's orbit, Skalni threw himself into preparation. He studied what was known of the *Pegasus*' planned trip, of her delta-V and facing before she jumped. He pulled up the list of other ships that had vanished over the past century, but nothing made sense. But then, jump didn't make sense.

And at night, the dreams and the memories tore into him. Normally he could sleep just floating in the breathing fluid, the mouthpiece sitting loosely in his muzzle. He didn't need it, but it ensured fresher liquid. Now throughout every night he thrashed and turned, churning through the liquid as memories tumbled through him. Memories of Meynar. He had to use the muzzle he'd only needed for actual jump to keep the mouthpiece in, and to keep from slamming into the walls of his fishbowl.

Meeting Meynar for the first time after he'd passed the entrance exams to the Academy.... The first time he'd seen Meynar, seen the heavy Clydesdale, Skalni had still been an airbreather. He'd stood before the bubble, and looked at the naked flesh of the horse inside. No mane, a stubby tail fragment. Sleek skin treated and modified to survive in the perfluorocarbon. Eyes that glistened behind implanted lenses. Hooves that were coated in plastic to keep from gradually rotting off. Hesitantly, palms wet with sweat, he'd reached up and touched the clear plastic, and Meynar had paddled over and put his palm on the other side. His eyes had been warm, welcoming, full of confidence, and full of respect for the young charge considering whether to take the final step of *conversion*.

He remembered Meynar standing by the operating table, wearing the heavy liquid filled helmet, holding the squirrel's hand in his own as the doctors put him under. To implant the spinal socket, to remove all his hair, his glorious hair, and to change his body in a thousand tiny ways. He remembered waking up, still connected to the heart-lung machine, submerged in his new world with Meynar floating beside him. He'd blinked, looked up with trusting eyes. The horse had held him tight against his chest, held him as the doctors turned off the machine and Skalni had taken his first breath in his new world. A last few bits of air curdled up his throat and out, as the thick and viscous perfluorocarbon had gurgled down. It had curdled through his throat like dense syrup. He'd gulped and gasped, mouth gaping like a fish, lungs screaming in pain as they fought to breathe. The coughing and gagging as he'd switched over. And, all the time, the warm clasp of Meynar helping him by just being there.

It took four weeks for the ship to reach the jump point, even as he studied the long route to *Faint Hope*, and what instructions other pilots could give.

"PILOT SKALNI, GIFT CARD'S VECTOR matches best known data for *Pegasus*. Will reach matching jump point in eight minutes, fifteen seconds. Acknowledge readiness."

Skalni felt his breathing liquid gurgling in his throat, the electrodes stuck to his neck itching. "Pilot Skalni acknowledging. Thank you, Captain. Am switching over to pilot mode, and keyboard acknowledgment." Skalni gave a last glance across his displays ship's systems and jump engine readiness. "My board shows all green. Will click to let you know when to begin extension."

"Understood pilot. Good luck."

"Thanks, Captain. Switching off."

For whatever reason, a pilot's jump vision was obscured, blocked by metal—even non-biological electrical currents. The larger the mass of metal, the higher the voltage or amperage, the more extreme the effect was. A complex system had been developed to minimize the visual obstruction and thus maximize the pilot's effectiveness. Skalni swam out of his quarters and down a short tunnel to a transparent bubble barely big enough for him. It wasn't plastic, but a natural resin blown into a bubble. The squirrel wiggled in through the lock and sealed it behind him, pulling it tight against natural rubber gaskets. Curling up, he grabbed the natural rubber muzzle, strapped it on, and then switched on the tiny resin pump inside. It was electric, but ran off batteries developed from electric eels, and every wire in it was vat grown nervous tissue. It clicked and whirred, pumping Skalni's lungs full of breathing fluid, and then pumping them out. The pump wasn't needed normally, but given the heavy fluid, it kept the pilot from being distracted whilst piloting. The *gurgle-gurgle* as it functioned annoyed some pilots, but relaxed Skalni.

It had relaxed Meynar too. In fact Meynar had helped him get used to it, used to the rhythm as it gurgled, the pressure moving his lungs in and out—

No! Don't think of Meynar. Concentrate—

No! Not now. *Now* he had to remember Meynar. Feel him, sense him. His soft flesh, his warm liquid breath, his gently confident touch, the unique modulations of his voice even through the electronics. Closing his eyes, Skalni saw the horse floating before him, eyes wide and kindly... his equine body radiating confidence.

The squirrel opened his eyes, relaxing to the gentle *gurgle-gurgle* of the pump. He reached behind and pulled out the *Plug*—carved of bone, wound with more vat grown nervous fibre. Twisting and reaching around to the

base of his spine, just above the scrawny remnants of his tail, Skalni felt and found the capped socket. He popped it open, the rubber hanging off a thin string, and then clicked the *Plug* in.

In his subconscious, in his body, handshaking protocols worked through their routines. When all was agreed, the data feeds from the ship were fed up through the slow organic cables and into his mind, forming a virtual overlay showing ship's status, jump drive status, and crew readiness. Everything was green, but Skalni had expected nothing less. He thought a command, twitched his tail, and told the ship systems behind him that he was ready and in command. Another acknowledgement and he felt a gentle jerk as the arms started extending, moving the Pilot out before his ship. The bubble rattled and shook, his breath gurgled in and out, and the universe spread out before him.

The sky was black, the black of nothingness, but scattered, painted, covered with endless sprinkles of stars. Below him, to the stern, was the bright spark of Sol. Before him was the void, nothingness. No sentient life other than man, and what man had created, had ever been found. But man and his children dreamed.

The bubble jerked to a stop. Silence, but for the gurgle of his breath. The ship was a kilometer behind, and turning he looked at his charge. It was a long quadruple spindle. In the front were his quarters, behind that the jump drive now spinning up. A long connecting structure and then the main body of the ship. Another long connecting structure and the drive section run only by computer, and visited only by the soon to die in the gravest of crises.

A countdown appeared on Skalni's virtual HUD. Three minutes till planned jump point. It wasn't an exact match for the *Pegasus*; it couldn't be. The planets had moved, stars had moved, tiny, *tiny* changes, but still a difference. Too much—?

Skalni felt Meynar's warm hand on his shoulder, heard the regular *gurgle-gurgle* of his breathing pump. It *would* be close enough!

The squirrel sent a mental command and the jump drive spun up to full readiness. Already fields of gravitational existence were focusing around him. Unlike early dreams, the physics did not allow the generated field to pull the ship, but it existed. It had force, squeezing and compressing the pilot as it swirled around him. That was why the fluid breathing had to be adopted. Fluid filled lungs, ear canals, a heavy pump to force what he needed to breathe: all allowed him to survive the gravitational potentials twisting and building around him. Invisible fingers tugged and pulled at

the squirrel's flesh, moving him gently in the fluid, pulling the resin of the bubble in towards the centre to crush him, only the geometry and atomic structure keeping it from smashing inwards.

A countdown appeared, a chart of the ship's position, and a mark showing where it had to be. Fields built, pressures grew, only the unbalanced ones pulling and kneading the squirrel's flesh. Almost there. He felt Meynar's hands on his shoulders, massaging him as after his first jump. His breath gurgled, gurgle in, gurgle out, gurgle in, gurgle out. A steady certainty.

Five seconds, four, three, two, one—

Skalni jerked, twitched, sent a mental command to leap into the void, into the translight vastness that nobody understood, not even the mathematicians. With his entire body he screamed out, liquid gurgling across his vocal cords, out through the pump.

*Jump—*

DIFFERENT SPECIES PERCEIVED JUMP SPACE in different ways. Humans saw it as an endless desert, each point an oasis they had to slowly trot to. They could do incredibly long range jumps, but *oh* so slowly. Deer uplifts saw jump as a series of clearings, and the void between a dense spiny forest they had to bound through to get to the next point of safety. Wolf uplifts saw it as a series of hunts. Each leap chasing prey and concluding with a pounce to the throat. Horses – Meynar – saw it as a plain covered with dense grass, each jump a mad dash from one oasis to another. And squirrels, flying squirrels—

Skalni felt jumpspace knit itself around him in all directions but one. Behind was a void, a nothingness, a blind spot that drew the eye, pulling the sanity into its nothingness. That was the ship. In all other directions were trees, mighty trees of near endless height; below them, a tangled bramble of thorns and sharp rocks, certain death... the nothingness between the stars.

Each tree was different. A few, so very few, were the glorious inviting green of life. Most were dense dry pine, needles orange and brown. Worthless but as a resting spot. And a few, here there, were a bloody red, dripping poison sap from their leaves and needles that smoked and hissed onto the ground below. The sky was a uniform gray, an endless *sameness* that extended forever and ever and ever.

Skalni looked around, clinging to a branch that creaked and groaned beneath him, straining to support an immense weight. Long practice let the squirrel pilot ignore everything but the vibrant green. There, Wonderland, humankind's first colony. He could feel the countless echoes of others



along the path, ready to guide him. Bunching his legs, Skalni leapt out of the safety of his tree, into the gray sky, out towards the first point.

He remembered being young in Anderson City. Playing in the great air storage caverns with his siblings – he'd been so light then, gliding had been effortless in the lunar gravity. Now— Now it was as though a thousand birds clung to him, a million burrish seeds, the weight of a thousand tonnes of starship and all her contents. With his will more than with his muscles, he yanked *Gift Card* out of reality and into the dreams of jump, pulling its mass behind him, surrounded by the fields of gravity its spinning jumpdrive twisted around him. With it, dragging the mass, he flew. Well, not flew – dragged, pulled, tugged with all his will, plowing the combined mass through the mindswept realms of jump, towards Wonderland.

The jump was easy, for so many had gone before. Even the brambles and thorns on the ground were thin, trampled under the imaging of countless other pilots. If Meynar had left spoor here, it was lost amongst so many others. Skalni felt the faint gurgle of his breath, distant – to some an annoyance, but to Skalni an anchor to what was real. Gurgles in, gurgles out, his real body kept alive by biological mechanisms as the twisted gravitation fields of the jump generators pulled and squeezed his body, crushing it beyond what was right, squeezing and pulling, even as Skalni used that solidness to drag the ship along.

Then he was there, Wonderland. Grabbing a branch, he clung as it swayed and dipped beneath him. Skalni could feel the mass of the ship pushing against him, wanting him to go on, and he wanted to use that push, that mass – but where? He looked quickly, trying to sense the echoes of a horse, running, galloping, joying in life. Out further and further from Sol. There? Yes! The memory showed the direction was right, and Skalni leapt.

It was easier, the ship lighter, but only its movement made it seem so. The world behind was erased, wiped out of existence, swept into the blinding *nothingness* of the ship. Skalni remembered his first jump as a passenger. The solid steel, the constant reality. And yet, in his mind, he could feel something tearing. Dreams fading away into mists as one was jerked awake. An aching of loss. An image flashed in his mind of a horse galloping through an endless desert, the next oasis fleeing further and further away the faster he ran—

No! Meynar was alive! Skalni shoved the dream back into the haunted depths of his subconscious, forcing himself to pull his ship as he flew.

The jump was a bit longer this time, his glide lower and lower. His target was a huge pine, ancient, knotted, dry brown needles everywhere.

He angled his flight a bit for a gap low in its foliage. Crashing through the leaves, Skalni felt his passage blowing more aside than would have been possible with his own form. The trunk slammed into him, and he clawed and scrabbled, grabbing hold. His breath gurgled loudly in his soul, and he climbed the tree, climbing higher and higher, dragging the ship up behind him. The tree bent, dipping closer and closer to the ground; whether from the mass Skalni was dragging, or from the absorption of its existence by the blindness behind him, the squirrel couldn't say. With the tree bending more and more, Skalni reached as high as he could go. Digging in with his muscles, he clung. The dry bark was scrabbling and tearing beneath him. His breath gurgling faster and faster in his real lungs as the simple biological muscles read his mental call for more. Even as the tree fell, he *leapt*. His direction wasn't as planned, wasn't as carefully plotted, but it felt *right*. Skalni had tried describing the feeling to other pilots, and they to him. Always they'd failed.

And this jump, Skalni *knew* was *right*. He could feel the ghost of Meynar leading the way.

The trees grew thicker, more and more being red. The stench of the woods grew dark. It smelled of the dead, of decay, of long abandoned things best never brought into the light. At the next waypoint, another brown pine, Skalni climbed high, as high as he could. Instead of using the trunk, he leapt up from branch to branch, dragging the ship as high as he could.

He knew he was getting close to the Gulf, a long stretch of poison and bramble. Meynar had described it to him after his return from his first round trip. To the horse it was a vast desert, full of treacherous gulleys and twisting gorges through sharp-edged rock, many of which ended leading nowhere, or led only to a cliff hanging over a vast bottomless nothingness.

He heard his breath gurgling rapidly in and out of his thin body. Based on travel estimates, he *should* have plenty of breathing oxygen, but time in jumpspace was always subjective, unique to each individual. His body shivered a bit as he remembered that the crew of the *Gift Card* was entirely volunteer.

Getting as high as he could, Skalni leapt even higher, stretching out his gliding flaps as far as he could. He could see a rapidly fading sea of brown replaced by blood-dripping red as far as the eye could see. A horse, Meynar, was better at longer jumps, at finding a difficult route. Skalni was faster, but— The dream filled ether whistled along his flaps, the blindness of the shipmass behind him pulling and yanking, jerking his course here and there. Each change made him adjust his path, costing him height. And,

it made his return point, where he had no choice but to turn back if he could not see a resting spot, come quicker than he planned.

There! A brown splotch!

Skalni angled toward it, falling lower and lower. The red reached up to him, clutching grabbing; he felt the ship behind him dragging through the brush, and just hoped the hull shielding was sufficient.

His claws dug into the tree. He had it!

It wasn't a neat landing, just a frantic grab for the dried bark, and a quick jump higher as he felt something reaching for him. He started climbing, the faint gurgling of his breath louder in his ears, and more frantic. He should be close — one more hop. This one had been close, he had to get all he could from this waypoint. He climbed higher and higher, the tree thinning, the weight of the ship heavy behind him. His claws slipped. Somehow he got back his grip. If the ship got away from him — Don't think of that. He gasped, his frantic gurgling loud in his ears. He could feel the muzzle in reality pinching painfully against his skin. He needed a break, just a short break — No, already the tree was starting to creak.

Meynar?

He sniffed the ether, smelling the scent, feeling the horse's presence. A strong echo, a flickering image of a rocky badlands, of a gorge, endless. Memories of a frantic desperate leap out over the emptiness —

Skalni shook his head. Had Meynar made it? There was nothing else. He was high enough now; he *could* return, *could* ensure the crew behind him survived.

*Guide your ship home.*

But Meynar — There was no death echo, no scream, no panic cry. He'd felt them once during a jump, the death wail of a pilot. The squirrel couldn't help but shudder, the breathing fluid cold in his lungs. Maybe he should have volunteered to be a courier, have gills instead of modified lungs. There were never passengers, even though the ranges were greater. For whatever reason, when a liquidbreather guided his ship back, his passengers were changed, losing lungs, gaining gills, rejecting any attempt to modify them back. Sure, he was a liquidbreather, but he used lungs. Somehow that helped. Don't think of that now. Focus, damn it, *focus!*

Was he imagining the lack of death? Dreaming? Hoping? But — Meynar hadn't made it to *Faint Hope*. But —

Skalni clenched all his muscles and pushed off as hard as he ever had, as high as he had ever gone. The ship dragged behind him and the liquid gurgled in and out of his lungs. Below him was a sea of red, endless in all

directions. He could still turn around – where was the brown? He couldn't see it, couldn't sense it. He was committed. He heard the desperate gurgling of Meynar, an echo in his mind. Life? Dreams? It *had* to be life. Had to be! He could feel the pump working faster and faster, but why? No— To prevent connection damage the oxygen was within his gravitationally focused bubble. It was limited. Could it be running low? Ignore that. Ignore! Nothing he could do about it.

He could see Meynar, ghostly, in mid-jump over a void that glimmered and glistened over the poisonous red languorously drifting back and forth beneath him. Echoing his own, Meynar's breath gurgled in and out of his lungs, faster and faster.

The red grew closer, reaching, growing. No brown anywhere, nothing but red. From the accounts he'd read, the Gulf was only one leap across – one leap! So, where was the end? There had to be an end. There had to be!

He felt echoes of Meynar's thoughts echoing his own. Had he taken a wrong turn, a wrong course? Was there no way out?

The faint gurgling echoed and died. Was the battery powering the pump drained? Was the oxygen gone? Don't think of that!

The red was closer. Skalni did everything he could, turning as carefully as possible to keep on the course Meynar had followed. To his death – no, to his *life*. Red, red, everywhere red. Clinging red, grasping red. A strand tickled his chest and he felt it burn, tearing away flesh. How had it gotten so high? It was gone, destroyed by the blindness of the ship. The jerking behind him was less? Had the ship lost pieces? Had—

Green? Was that *green* he saw? In the distance, far, so very, *very* far. He could make it. He had to. Meynar had made it.

Had Meynar— He had, *had*!

Skalni was starting to feel weak. The gurgling – it was silent. Had been silent. He felt his chest quiver – nothing. Need, burning need. The green was close, so close. It was calling him, drawing him. All he had to do was drop what was weighing him down, fly high and safe and reach the greenness.

He shook his head. No! *Guide your ship home!* The ship was there. It had to be. It *was* there. Meynar was at the oasis, collapsed at the edge. *No!* But there was no death echo. No—

Red burned at him, burned his flesh, tore into his muscles. He screamed, his breath silent in the water. Green, green, the ship, the ship. Save the ship, *guide your ship home!* Guide, he had to guide. Guide the ship, the ship. He slammed into the trunk, the green trunk, it had to be.

It had to be—

With the last of his will he forced himself up the tree—  
*Jump—*

SKALNI FELT REALSPACE FORMING AROUND HIM, oozing into the dreams he'd been in. The breathing pump was silent; he was faint, faint. Pain screamed through his chest, along his tail. Pain, screaming stabbing *pain*. Screams tore out of his soul, burned down the link in his mind. He could scent blood in his muzzle. Screaming, screaming, as his lungs gasped and shuddered and everything faded to black—

SKALNI STOOD IN THE HANGAR BAY of the *Pegasus*. Other than members on critical duties, the survivors of both crews were there. *Pegasus* had survived its jump with the loss of one, *only* one. *Gift Card*, on the other hand, had lost half her crew, and a good third of the ship. They'd barely gotten him back to his module, and into oxygenated fluid, in time. As Skalni had thought, his pump's battery had run down. And, so too, had his supply of oxygen.

The squirrel sagged in his travel chair. The uniform he rarely wore hung limply on his thin body. Plastic casts encased both legs, internal electronics guiding and aiding the nanites that swarmed inside, rebuilding him. A transparent helmet covered his head – the plastic so clear, the liquid inside so clear, it was like Skalni was actually breathing air.

The squirrel uplift gnawed on the mouthpiece as his breathing medium gurgled in and out. He was too weak to breathe on his own, his body needing all its strength for the healing. He tried to laugh, but was defeated by pain. At least he was used to the machines.

Coffins were lined up in front of him, shining labels of their contents stamped on their top. Most were full – some weren't, their occupants' bodies lost to jumpspace. Below the ships was a new world, a habitable world. A place of dreams, of— He swallowed. *Meynar's Dream*. He'd named it so, both crews giving him the honour, for he'd led the rescue ship here and brought the hope of returning home to the others.

He gave a last look at Meynar's coffin. It was tradition for pilots to be sent to their fellow rest by pilots. They'd kept the horse's body as a hope of being rescued. His coffin was sealed as the rest, even though his tutor's body was unharmed, undamaged. Turning around, he faced the combined ship's companies.

"We all know why we're here. Not really much more to say to that. We all know the risks of space, and we accept them willingly." His pumped breath gurgled in his throat. "We all knew the possible cost. None of us

choose this fate. We fought it with all our training, all our will. We fought it with all our dreams—”

He remembered listening to Meynar telling him of his dream. Of exploration, of finding that jewel of jewels, a new world.

“We all came expecting to do our jobs, to carry our cargo, use our skills, and do what had to be done. Without glamour, without any expectation of reward. Pilot Meynar had the dream. The dream of discovery, of finding new worlds, of seeing what no one else ever had. But, he did not meet the criteria, and our worlds have other needs.”

He remembered holding Meynar tight against him, the horse’s and his breath’s gurgling together, when Meynar had found out he’d been rejected for exploration duty.

“I don’t know what Pilot Meynar was thinking. I know he wasn’t consciously aiming for a new world, a risky jump into mystery. I’m absolutely certain. I don’t know what happened, what went wrong. Maybe his dreams pulled him another way....

“But he was a pilot. *Guide your ship home* is hammered into us. It is our motto, it is our task, it is our *duty*. Routine trips to near worlds, less routine trips to the newer colonies. Pilot Meynar knew his job. He’d jumped many times.”

He remembered Meynar hugging him, and whispering in his ear the horse’s pet name for him before his first jump. *Good luck, little gurgle buddy*.

“And, this time, like all the others, he knew what he had to do. He had to guide his ship home, in this case a new home. With his last breath he pulled the *Pegasus* back into realspace, dying after fulfilling his mission. He left you lost, but he left you *alive*.

“I followed, bringing my ship to this new home, even though the cost was high. And I will take you home, all of you, along the trail that Pilot Meynar blazed, and that I blazed. Others will come. More and more. And each will remember that Pilot Meynar fulfilled his guild oath... protected his ship, his crew. And each will remember the lives we honour today.”

With that the squirrel turned his chair around and pressed the main airlock control. He watched the heavy doors grinding upward from the deck. Even over the gurgling of his breath, he heard their grumbling, and the final *clang* as they sealed shut. An image of the inside of the airlock, of the contents, appeared, projected where all could see it.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Unto almighty God we commend the souls of the departed, and we commit their remains to the eternal deep.” The artificial gravity in the ’lock was turned off, and the coffins sat there.

The outer door pulled open. Swirls of air pushed the coffins together in a tangle, and let each escape into the endless deeps.

And the squirrel whispered in the calm electronically generated voice.  
“Good luck, big gurgle buddy. You will be remembered.”





## THE LAST DRAGON

AN OLD MAN IN A GREENPEACE TEE-SHIRT and faded jeans struggled to make his way up the steep scrub-covered rocky slope. Resembling your typical Sixties burnout except for the presence of a long white beard and gnarled oak walking staff, he paused briefly to catch his breath before renewing his attack up the rough trail. Sweat beading on his forehead, he pulled himself over a small field of boulders, coming face to face with his objective. The cave wasn't all that impressive, a good portion of its entrance being covered over by roots and vines, but there was an unmistakable presence emanating from its shadowy depths and around the cave not a bird sang and not a rodent stirred. The old man marched straight ahead and through the dark portal as if he were walking to his local laundromat. His eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness and he began to look around.

*"Who goes there? How dare you enter my home! Foolish mortal, you will pay the ultimate price for your folly!"* thundered a voice out of the darkness

"Quiet! I'll have no more of that from you!" roared back the old man. "You know who I am and you don't need me to reiterate why it is in your best interest to show yourself to me without further delay."

The great snakelike red dragon slinked out into the center of the cavern, smoke drifting up lazily from his nostrils as he mumbled something about eating that damnable old wizard years ago. "Yeah, whatda ya want."

"We need to talk."

"Well, we obviously need to talk, old man. You wouldn't have dragged yourself up here just to offer me a cup of tea."

"I just got back from a meeting with The Council and I'm afraid the news isn't good."

"Since when is any news from The Council good?"

"I think you should be taking this a little more seriously." The wizard paused and sighed. "Why couldn't you have just been evacuated with the rest of them?"

"This is *my* land, *my* cave, *my* home and *my* horde," snarled the dragon as he knocked asunder a pile of silver service with his talon. "Ain't no Council going to take it away from me."

"But I'm afraid they have, old friend. They've ordered you to be rationalized."

A look of pure fear washed away the defiance that the great dragon had worn on his face.

"R-rationalized? No! They wouldn't dare! What right do they have?"

"All the right they need, my old friend. This is a world of science now; there just isn't place for a creature like you. You were lucky they let you stay behind at all."

"Why are they doing this to me now? I've lived here for hundreds of years. I wasn't hurting anyone. This isn't fair!"

"What have you done?" sneered the Wizard. "You've let humans see you, befriended them even."

"You couldn't know how lonely I've been. As pretty as it is, my horde is cold and lifeless and although nutritious, relatively tasteless. Even animals avoid me. I had to do something. Those humans aren't going to tell anybody and even if they did no one would ever believe them. What's the harm?"

"The harm? You let them take pictures of you! They have been showing up all over the internet."

"So! Who's ever going to believe stuff they see on the Internet?"

"And that one particular human... the one you gave the scale to..."

"I might."

"...the one that lets him turn into a dragon over nights of the full moon, national bank holidays and the ides of March?"

Sensing defeat, the dragon leaped into desperation.

"He called me 'Great Lord' and gave me back rubs. Do you know how long it's been since someone has done that for me! Millennia! I had to give him some sort of gift."

"Well, your gift has scrambled national air defence interceptors three times this year already. I'm sorry, your actions have left the council with little recourse."

"Listen, you win. I'll do whatever you want. I freely admit that my actions might not have been motivated by the best of judgments, but what are the purpose of mistakes if not to learn from them? Just leave me alone and I

swear that you'll never have to come up here to yell at me again. On my honor as a dragon."

"Listen, you don't seem to understand. I wasn't sent here as a messenger, I was sent here to carry out the ruling of the council."

If the dragon didn't instantly grasp the wizard's meaning, a tingling at the base of his tail drove it home. The dragon suddenly found himself fighting to hold back the most urgent bowel movement he had ever experienced. His teeth gritted and his facial muscles strained, but it was no use. His tail hole parted and a stream of slimy liquid gushed forth like a fire hose. It was then that he began to shrink.

"You son of a satyr," snarled the dragon, tears streaming down his snout and his body growing noticeably smaller, "you have killed me. Rue the day when you travel to the world after for I will be waiting for thee."

The dragon's rate of shrinkage was dizzying as he passed elephant size and proceeded down to rhino, the puddle that used to be his body mass flowing freely across the floor.

"Cut the melodrama, you overstuffed saurian, your sentence is not death, but only that your form be altered to something more appropriate to the world in which you live."

"Death would be a welcome alternative to this humiliation," sobbed the dragon.

As the dragon lost more and more liquid, his remaining mass began to coalesce, making his body feel tired and slow. It was like he was filled with hardening molasses and in a last ditch effort to die with some sort of honor the dragon began to claw himself toward the wizard, a look of pure hatred spread across his maw and the wish of tearing the wizard limb from limb gleaming in his eye.

"Honestly," remarked the wizard, "I don't see what you are possibly hoping to accomplish. You would hate to contort yourself into an uncomfortable position for all eternity now would you."

"Muuuust... kiiiiilllll," slurred the dragon, now finding it much harder to speak and breathe.

"Oh, hush," snapped the wizard.

With those words the dragon felt first a looseness in his muzzle and then some force beyond his command stretched his great maw to open. Wider and wider it opened with the dragon standing by in wonderment as to how much farther it was going to go and why he was feeling no pain. Then suddenly, with a dull thud, his lower jaw simply unhinged itself and plopped onto the floor. The dragon, now no larger than a cat, watched helplessly as his mandible rocked slowly back and forth, its rate of shrinkage

greatly accelerated. As its size passed one inch the lower jaw began to lose its ruby red sheen and began to fade into a dull, ugly, plain gray. In a matter of seconds the dragon found himself staring not at a beautiful part of his anatomy, but at a lifeless chunk of lead. He then felt a looseness in his backside and then two dull thuds as his wings toppled to the ground. The loss of his ability to fly would have brought tears to his eyes had they not already congealed into a metallic sludge. The dragon felt something give at the base of his tail and he pitched forward, slamming what was left of his snout into the hard rock of his cave. He was soon relieved of this uncomfortable position when his left legs fell off, rolling him over onto his side. Unable to move his head, the dragon could just barely see his two remaining legs slide off his body. The last thing the last dragon felt was a tingling at the base of his neck and as his head bounced lightly on the cave floor. Welcome darkness spared the dragon from having to see his headless body.

The wizard looked down at what had once been the massive red dragon, now an inanimate, eight-inch long miniature. While the world no longer had a place for magical mythical beasts, fantasy models were more than acceptable and thus the balance had been restored. The wizard gently picked up each piece and carefully placed them in a shoebox filled with cotton. Smiling to himself, he took a GPS reading of the location of the cave and its priceless hoard and then placed an illusion over the jet-black passageway in order to protect its contents for some undetermined future use. Picking up his staff the wizard glanced at his watch.

"Drat! I spent too much time yakking with that truculent dragon. If that blasted lizard makes me miss my train I'll paint him purple with yellow polka-dots."

The wizard paused for a second, made a careful look around, then waved his staff, conjuring a dual-suspended mountain bike out of thin air.

"I hope they'll let me bring this on the train," mumbled the wizard as he took off down the hill. After all, "It's Only Natural" closed at five and if he didn't come home with his wife's shopping list completed in full there'd be hell to pay.

BILL SINGER, EXHAUSTED FROM ANOTHER futile day of searching for a job, was standing on the subway platform watching the train slowly pull to a stop in front of him. The doors opened and Bill was quickly pushed aside by an old man carrying about three shopping bags too many.

"Excuse me," said the man, muffled by the bag in front of his face, but

Bill had already entered the subway car and slouched into a seat, caring nothing for polite courtesy at that moment.

Bill just wanted to get back to his nice warm apartment and settle down for a nice evening of engaging in his favourite stress busting hobbies. He put his arm down on the empty seat next to him only to find something there. Bill looked down to see a white, unbranded shoebox with “last dragon” written on the top in pencil. Bill looked around the subway car to see if he could determine the box’s owner, but the group of noisy school children and the panhandling bum did not look like likely candidates.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Bill lifted up the top of the box and moved away the cotton padding. An audible gasp escaped his lips as he glimpsed the disassembled lead pieces inside. Throwing caution to the wind he quickly rummaged through the box to get a good look at all that it contained. Bill was puzzled. An avid miniature painter himself, he had never seen the design of dragon that the mystery box contained... and he got catalogues in four different languages. The miniature must have been either a custom job or some old design that he’d never encountered before. It could be the last dragon that some unknown hobby shop had in stock or the last piece of some highly limited edition. Even in its raw, unpainted state, the dragon miniature was surprisingly lifelike and any thought of returning the box to its rightful owner quickly evaporated from Bill’s mind. When the train arrived at his stop he burst forth from the doors knocking aside two nuns and an old man. Taking the steps up to street level three at a time and leaping over the exit turnstiles, Bill arrived at his apartment block wheezing out of breath and in record time.

Bill shut the door to his apartment and locked the door. Carefully he withdrew the precious box from under his coat and set it down on his work desk. He had been currently in the process of painting several companies of high elves and casting futuristic tanks out of resin, but they were pushed aside for what Bill was now considering a gift from God. He slowly removed each piece from the box: head, lower jaw, tail, left wing, right wing, hind legs, fore legs, and body, and then went about studying each one, determining his plan of attack. Something inexplicable in the back of Bill’s mind told him that it should be a red dragon so he carefully began to assemble the needed paints.

He first gingerly spread out the pieces of the lead figure and decided on a plan of attack. Affixing the dragon’s torso securely in a vice, Bill adroitly drilled matching holes in both it and the neck that it would attach to. Then, after cutting a short segment of wire and ramming it into the torso hole

with a pair of pliers, Bill applied a nice even coating of epoxy to both sides of the joint and, making sure the wire lined up, stuck the two ends together, holding them firm with a couple of rubber bands.

“Well,” said Bill to himself, “one down, eight to go.”

Meanwhile, the dragon, who had been somewhat indifferent to his extended state of unconscious nothingness, was shocked back into awareness by the rough vibrations racking his still disassembled body. Even though the dragon had been in a state of disassembly, he had retained some connection to the remote parts of his body. Even so, when the glue squished out onto his neck as the dragon’s head and torso were forced together he felt an electric shock and a flash filled his sensorium. Just like when the four elemental robots join to form the big super mega robot, the last dragon was filled with a wonderful feeling of wholeness and as his eight other parts were joined together the dragon felt the pieces of his immortal spirit coming back into contact, paths of energy beginning to flow again and his strength, crystallized in lead and dormant for so long, melting and infusing his body with power, it would only be a matter of time.

AFTER A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP Bill awoke fully refreshed and eager to continue work on his newest masterpiece. He first primed everything in black and then, dipping into the white and each time carefully whipping the brush nearly free of paint, he drybrushed the disassembled figure, giving it a dirty gray look.

The disembodied awareness that was the last dragon was floating in a sea of endless night. Although the wholeness of his spirit was comforting he still had no feeling and he began to ponder if he was in fact experiencing death. It was at that moment that the darkness grew somewhat lighter and suddenly he could feel himself again. Not in a real definite sense, but as if he were a balloon, both possessing and lacking a shape at the same time.

Bill had just finished painting the scaly bits of the dragon a brilliant scarlet, then mixed some red and black together, proceeded to water it down and then lightly spread it all over the dragon’s hide. After taking a brief Mountain Dew break, Bill drybrushed the dragon a lighter red and then painstakingly outlined the chest scales in black. Next he made short work of blackening the dragon’s eyes, nostrils and interior mouth parts.

The dragon began to feel his amorphous self hardening into a thick outer shell. Like a cascading row of dominoes the dragon felt his thick armor of scales flow from his neck to his tail. Like a light bulb being turned on he could suddenly smell and although he was still blind and had no teeth, he could feel the new presence of his eyes and maw. His mouth grew warm

and he could feel his gums. His scales regained their tempered strength and like Christmas lights blinking to life the dragon felt his teeth return to him. He roared a mental roar of triumph.

“Ha! When I am fully formed once again I will have my revenge and that vile wizard shall pay dearly. “

Bill had returned from watching his Sci-Fi original movie to paint the inside of the mouth and the gums red. He then added another red wash to the scaled areas and then got to work on detailing the face. One by one, using a four-hair brush, he painted the deadly miniature teeth a gleaming titanium white and then painted the same into both eyes. Soon after detailing the yellow iris he added the small dot of the pupil and gazed for the first time into the nearly completed, albeit disassembled, face of his new creation.

A tingly adrenaline rush enveloped the dragon as his teeth were restored to him and he was temporarily disoriented by the wash of light and colour filling his blank sensorium as his eyes were restored to him. As his vision slowly returned to focus he saw for the first time the puny little human who was painstakingly restoring his form to him.

“What a naïve little species,” the last dragon chuckled to himself. “What truly intelligent being would ever willingly restore a dragon its teeth and vision.”

With the new model nearing completion, Bill was getting excited. He painted the edges of the myriad claws and horns black and then finished them up with a nice coat of ivory. He then applied some final cosmetic changed by drybrushing the belly scales white, applying a brown wash, then finally going over them in ivory. The painting complete, Bill put down the brush and stood admiring his work. All that was left was to spray the figure in a protective clear coat and let it dry. Bill opened the window, shook up the can of Krylon and went to work.

The last dragon felt a massive surge of energy course through his system, his dormant powers and abilities springing to life, his fragmented and cursed being finally re-united into its glorious whole. He concentrated, strained and then willed his body to move, to take the first step forward down a new life of sweet revenge. At first nothing happened, then he felt long stiff joints begin to crack, muscles began to tense and flex, the tip of his tail twitched, then his toes, then finally his leg lurched forward causing the dragon to lose his balance and fall flat on his snout.

“Gryphon turds!” exclaimed the dragon as he fought to right his stiff body. Regaining his balance and then cycling through his extremities to make sure they had regained their full range of motion he opened his eyes

and looked around. He was standing on a worktable in the middle of what looked to be a very cluttered living room. He felt a breeze on his back and turned quickly to discover its source.

*Crash! Shatter!*

The last dragon winced as his prodigal tail knocked a soup mug to the floor, however, upon turning around again to inspect the damage he came face to face with the human that had liberated him from his shoebox prison.

“Holy shit! You’re real.”

While the dragon had first considered brutally killing this lowly human who had painted him up like a solstice tree, such an act would undoubtedly attract undue attention from those in the magical community. The dragon had just hoped to slip out unnoticed, but as the damage had been done he felt that he might as well at least humour the human that had saved him.

“Um... yes,” muttered the dragon, making a show of looking himself over and then bringing up his small eight-inch body to a more regal looking posture. “You did an adequate job with my restoration; I will not kill and eat you. I will leave now. Tell anyone of our encounter and I will come back and, um, eat your soul.”

The dragon turned toward the open window, spread his wings and leapt into the air. For a brief moment he felt the wonderful feeling of power as his wings scooped up large quantities air and as his magic pushed his great un-airworthy bulk against the pull of gravity. Unfortunately, the open window soon disappeared from the dragon’s sightline, quickly replaced by the wall then the carpeted floor.

*Thud!* The dragon impacted with the floor, lay there for a second, and then rubbed his muzzle, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. His wings were working, he had felt his magic pushing, but he had fallen like a piano pushed from an airplane. Before he could continue down this line of thought he felt something grab his tail and hoist him into the air.

“You’re not much of a dragon if you can’t fly. You’re in no shape to be going anywhere anyway. You should probably just stay with me awhile; we can swap stories. I’ll bet you are thousands of years old and have met all sorts of interesting people and mythical creatures.”

“Let me down, you pathetic four-limb!” bellowed the dragon in a voice that would instantly petrify any rodent sized creature with fear. *“That’s it, your life will be spared no longer!”*

The dragon shut his eyes and once again summoned his magical powers. He felt the transformational energy flow through him and formed the image of a roughly human sized version of himself, large enough to



kill and eat the human, but small enough not to burst out the apartment. He felt his shape flow and change and when he was satisfied he opened his eyes... only to find himself still upside-down and firmly within the clutches of the human.

Bill looked at the animate toy dragon for a second, but the caution quickly faded from his eyes as it became clear that the dragon could not do anything to harm him.

"Here, let me put you down and help you relax," said Bill putting him back on the table with a loud thunk. "Do you like being scratched under the jaw?"

"I will tolerate no more such treatment at the hands of a lesser being. *Rraagh!*"

The dragon leapt at Bill and lashed out with tooth and claw. However, instead of razor sharp tungsten-carbide points rending flesh and bone, Bill looked down to see the last dragon futilely attempting to get through his sweatshirt with implements of dull, painted lead.

"Ahhhhh. That's so cute! You're just a big pussycat! Well, a scaly lead pussycat," remarked Bill as he reached down to pluck the dragon from his shirt.

Seeing the hand coming the dragon turned his attention from Bill's shirt to his finger and chomped down upon it as hard as he could.

"Fuck!" exclaimed Bill in pain as he grabbed the dragon and dropped it onto the kitchen table. "Ow! That's not nice! Bad dragon! *Bad!*"

Bill proceeded to tap on the top of the dragon's head with a finger while saying "bad dragon" over and over again. This humiliation served only to enrage the dragon further. No longer thinking rationally, the dragon fell back on instinct, opened his mouth wide and proceeded to lash out at his human tormentor with ten-thousand-degree plasma. Unfortunately, all that issued forth was a strangled "gak" sound.

"Enough of that – it looks like you need a little time out," said Bill, grabbing the dragon by the scruff of the neck and neatly depositing him into a terrarium containing a small battle scene. "You'll just stay in here until you learn how to behave yourself."

Bill closed and locked the lid and the dragon stood there for a second in shock and disbelief before promptly trying to claw his way through the glass.

"I won't let you out until you calm down," chided Bill as he passed by the terrarium carrying a bowl of microwave soup on his way to watch Andromeda on TV. The dragon stopped slamming his forehead into the side of the tank and sat back on his haunches. He then noticed the carefully

built peasant village at the far end of the terrarium and once again destructive thought began to flow through his brain if for no other reason than to spite this foul human. He walked over and raised up a claw.

"Touch it and I'll put you in the oven and form you into miniature sheep," said Bill still watching his show, not even needing to turn around.

The dragon stopped once again, looked around him and as the hard truth impressed itself upon its mind he buried his muzzle in his now useless talons and began to sob, his misery evident despite the fact that no tears came forth from his painted eyes.

SOME TIME LATER....

"Tell me about meeting Saint George again," said Bill as the dragon pushed over the saltshaker.

"I have already told you that story six times. Does your primitive brain lack the capacity to carry out the most basic recollective processes?"

"Hey, do you want to spend the night in the toolbox again?" said Bill, an ominous tone in his voice.

The self-confident sneer melted from the dragon's muzzle and he proceeded to stare down at the tablecloth. "No sir."

"Then make with the story, and no sarcasm this time. After dinner you can get back to work detailing my miniatures. And please be quick about it this time. There is a twenty-four hour *Star Trek: The Animated Series* marathon on the Sci Fi channel and I don't want to miss a single one.

The last dragon cringed internally. The oven almost seemed to be a preferable fate than a whole day of *The Animated Series*. Still, the dragon was immortal and a few decades of suffering was nothing to a dragon. One day the puny mortal would die or someone would discover his existence or maybe the wizard would sense his presence and he would be free. At least that's what he kept telling himself.

## DEAF AND BLIND

*"I SAID TWENTY DOLLARS!"*

Morgan's lip quivered as he felt his tail fall flat to the cold rough pavement. Hard life lessons kept him from looking up at the black equine towering over him in the massive polished black SUV. "I'm sorr-sorry sir." He fought to keep any hint of growl out of his voice. "You said to fill—"

The horse glared, tall and successful and arrogant, looking down from his throne at the dull, listless black panther. "Boy, I said twenty and twenty is all I'm going to pay." With that, he threw a crumpled twenty dollar bill out the window which whined as he power-rolled it up. He rolled away in a cloud of smoke and oil that made Morgan cough and gag, even as he grabbed for the bill.

Behind him, the pump obstinately flashed the total gas price of "\$57.82".

As he grasped the bill with his declawed fingers, a car roared by one the street, honking its horn in a loud scream. Horns and cars were all he could hear anymore; his mother would've called him world-deaf. He didn't even flinch a tattered ear as he clenched the bill, and as the pair of young bucks laughed as they roared off into the distance.

Limping a little, the cheap canvas sandals over his dirty, grease-stained, ciawless paws, he made his way into the little booth. There his co-worker, a friendly little rabbit named Phil, saw the single bill and the actual total on the compute display screen.

"You know, the boss is going to take that off your paycheck, Morgan."

Morgan tried to reply, but instead suddenly inhaled, and then sneezed. It wasn't a cold. Had to be fumes, or dirt, or who knows what. It didn't really

matter as he hadn't smelled anything other than the bitter itch of gasoline fumes for years. Scent-blind, his father would have called it.

Sniffing a little, he unfolded the torn and mangled bill and managed to get it mostly flat and into the register.

THE STREETCAR RIDE HOME was the same as always. Morgan slumped at the back, keeping his eyes down in case somebody thought he looked threatening. He had no idea how his malnourished ratty frame could ever be considered threatening, but after his last beating by a gang of goats, he didn't care to take the risk. To pass the time he skimmed a muddy scrap of paper – the cover story was that the vote in Parliament to muzzle carnivores in parks had failed to reach a majority. Barely.

Morgan reached his stop and avoided the neighbourhood rubbing post as much as he could. The herbivores had taken it over, and their antlers and horns had dug deep into the wood. If any of them scented even a hint of himself, there'd be hell to pay. For him, that was. Getting to his apartment building, he climbed all the flights of stairs. He didn't even notice the garbage as his paws kicked it aside. The only light came from the streetlights through small grimy windows, but it was enough for his large, blood-shot eyes. As he usually did, he reached his room without incident, and unlocked the door. It was only a single room, and when he clicked the light switch nothing happened. The power was probably out again. Sandals slapping on the worn wood floor, he pulled a carefully bagged scrap of his weekly meat allowance out of the still cold freezer, and put it on top to defrost for breakfast. Then he tossed his dirty clothes into the hamper, scratched and bit, and fell onto the old mattress he'd found. Eyes half closed, he fumbled around until he grabbed the unrecognizable rag doll which was all he had from before he became a ward of the state.

That night he dreamed of his youth. His happy youth when his parents were still alive. Before the deer and the horses had taken over the two main parties by numbers. Before the herbivore majority had started bringing in the Protective Laws to protect the greater good. The herbivore greater good, that was.

He remembered his parents speaking out against the *tyranny of the majority*, garnering support from the silent majority of moderates.

And he remembered being awakened *that* night to the sound of gunshots, the clatter of hooves, and finding his parents dead in a pool of blood. An equine ear was still clenched in his father's jaw, drenched in blood and gore.

As he had then, he mewed his heart out, the dream only ending when

a thrown book clattered against the other side of one of his walls, and an angry voice shouted, "Shut up already!"

Rubbing at his tears, holding the little doll tighter, he settled back into sleep.

THE ALARM WENT OFF AT NOON. He got almost no sunlight as his only window was practically adjacent to the next building. Banging the clock until it shut up, he groomed and stretched. The only pleasure he had left. One toe at a time, wincing a little at the scarred muscles grabbing at claws that had long ago been ripped out at the orphanage for the general safety. One muscle, one limb, one ripple of flesh at a time. It took over half an hour, but it wasn't like he had anything else to do. Letting some cool, metallic water tinkle into the sink, he lapped some into his parched muzzle, and then grabbed his one towel from the rope that let it dry, grabbed his keys, and padded to the shared washroom. The water was barely lukewarm, but that was fine with him as it woke him up.

Using a scrap of soap somebody else had left, he cleaned out the grease and dirt as best he could. After turning the water off, he padded over into the shaking stall and shook himself off as best he could. Then he towed himself dry until the stiff cloth was almost dripping. Padding back to his room, he left wet prints down the hallway. It was warmer in his room, and the brisk brushing loosened his muscles and got him warm and comfortable.

With no time to relax, he grabbed the defrosted meat and gnawed on it. His teeth struggled to tear into the thick, leathery hardness.

His stomach had barely gotten out of starving mode when he had to leave. Putting the half eaten chunk of meat back into the now rattling and grinding freezer, he pulled the station shirt over his body, yanked on some shorts, wincing as they pulled at his fur, stuck his paws into the oily sandals, and walked slowly to catch the street car.

After all, he couldn't run. Some doe, or some mare, might think it was threatening.

THE STATION WAS BUSY WHEN HE GOT THERE in the midst of rush hour. He was early – stars forbid he *ever* be late! He barely had time to clock in before he dug into the mob of cars. Always he moved slowly, always eyes down to be non-threatening, and always the looks of fear, and the occasional verbal taunt that was all the law limited them too. Assault was still assault.

Just before six, some joker of a teenager honked his horn *accidentally* whilst Morgan had his head poked under the kid's hood adding more oil.

Though long and bitter experience, he just kept pouring. Finishing, and keeping his head lowered, he raised his voice above the bleating laughter of the young bucks and, at least, got the money that they owed.

As he left, one of the bucks snorted at him, and then spit a big glob of half chewed cud onto the fine fur of his cheek. Then they all drove off, howling with laughter.

Even with the mob of customers still lined up, Morgan hurried to the booth, head lowered, and grabbed the washroom key. Turning around, he stopped, muzzle to chest with his boss.

A glob of the cud slid off Morgan's cheek and plopped onto his shirt. "Morgan Lurrson!"

Morgan's boss was a massive moose, old and bitter, fur tinged in white and gray. Long before Morgan had started working there, something had almost completely ripped off one of the boss's antlers, and his scarred head was always slightly lopsided.

"Do you have any idea how many customers your slovenliness has chased away?" he boomed out.

Morgan saw a car turn and drive back onto the main street. He'd tried mentioning that during an earlier tirade; having learned, Morgan kept his head lowered, and his ears pulled down in submission, listening as the rant went on and on. This was the only job he'd been able to get, and he couldn't afford to lose it. At appropriate times, tail between his legs, he nodded and said, "Yes, Boss."

"Now go and get cleaned up! And, I'm docking the lost income from every single car your messiness has driven away from your pay cheque!"

There went today's pay. All of it. And probably all of tomorrow's. And the landlord wasn't an understanding type. Maybe Phil—

With those thoughts going through his head, he turned and walked to the washroom to get cleaned up.

He actually got one tip when he went back to work.

AFTER THAT, THE SHIFT WENT from bad to worse. Morgan was spit on, ridiculed, challenged with hoof and antler. Twice people refused to pay. One elk, young and half-drunk, dropped and lost not one, but *three* pens, before finally scrawling a signature on the credit card receipt. More to be docked from his pay.

The worst was the tiny squirrel who *accidentally* fumbled with his debit card, dragging the sharp edge of the plastic across Morgan's palm until it bled. He might've believed the squirrel's protestations, if he hadn't heard him bragging on his cell phone as he pulled out.

And then *she* came. It was late, and the station was quiet, pumps waiting in a silent vigil.

"Fill it up with thirty dollars of regular. Not the superior grade, the regular stuff. And only thirty dollars. Three. Zero."

Morgan simply nodded, though something nagged at him as the old and dirty gray mare with one ear missing, went on and on. One eye had been torn out long ago, leaving a scarred hole. All the time she spoke clearly and *very* slowly, as though she was talking to an idiot. All the time her voice dripped with hatred and disdain.

"And when it's full, I'm going to pay by debit card, *not* credit. And I want you to do it here, in front of me, where I can see you. Have you got *all* that?"

Morgan just nodded, and started to fill her battered and rusty blue car with gasoline. All the time something nagged at him. Something—

When her tank was full, Morgan stepped up to her window. "Thirty dollars, ma'am." She glared at him for having the temerity to even speak to his better, but shoved the card into his palm.

The sounds of the street faded, the scent of oil and gas and exhaust fumes vanished as he went to get the remote debit machine. Carrying it back, his step quickened, his worn sandals slapping on the fluorescent-lit pavement. Out of his control, his tail whipped back and forth, even as he kept his eyes down.

Standing beside her door, eyes down, he entered the total. Then he ran her debit card through the machine and it dutifully displayed, "Thirty dollars credit OK?" Ignoring her glare, he handed the machine to her.

"You *dumbfuck!* I said debit, *not* credit!" Her voice rose to a grating screech. "Get somebody who knows how to do something! Get me—"

As the mare went on and on, she leaned forward until her muzzle was against his. But for once, he refused to flinch.

And his mind finally realized why.

He was no longer world deaf. No longer scent blind.

The missing ear in his father's jaw. The scent that he still recognized.

Even as she ranted, yelling and screaming at his idiocy, his declawed paws grabbed her ears and yanked.

Then he tore her throat out.





*This story was born when Michael Bard and I became good friends. Both of us had known each other for a little while and we'd chatted about stories from time to time. But then Raven Blackmane put forward his fourth Thousand Words contest. Each of us was to write a story of at least a thousand words in length that involved some picture that Raven had selected. During the run-up to the contest deadline, Michael and I engaged in some competitive jibes, playful and friendly. We both entered. I won second place, and he first, by a half point. What ensued next was even more playful competitive ribbing, promises that I'd get him next time. Either way, we'd become good friends because of the content, and that friendship deepened through all the conversations we'd share and the gatherings at which we'd meet in the years that followed.*

*This story was the product of that friendship. When Raven offered a fifth Thousand Word contest, we agreed to coauthor a story. I chose the picture, and developed a basic plot. Together we developed and fleshed out the world. Then, as I was suffering from severe writer's block, Michael – before I'd quite realized it – had written the story. And a marvellous job he'd done. I changed a few things here and there, but the text is almost all his own.*

*We didn't win the contest. But we won something better. A deep and abiding friendship that has endured to this day, and without which the tome you now hold in your hands would not have been possible.*

*~ Jason Gillespie*

## CHASING DREAMS ~ WITH JASON GILLESPIE

HIS FATHER THREW HIM INTO his small cubicle, his body flying onto the bed, his head slamming against the ancient cracked wall with a thickening *kaschlump*. "If you aren't going to work, then you aren't going to eat! Think about that!" With that, Patric heard him stomp off.

Blinking back tears, Patric winced as the door slammed behind him, the sound echoing, momentarily drowning out the omnipresent growl of machinery all around them in the Outer Complex. Somewhere beyond the walls of his small cubicle sounded the howl of the poisonous dust laden winds. His stomach growling in protest, it realized that sustenance wasn't forthcoming. He licked his dried and cracked lips, and blinked back tears and blood.

He pulled himself off the bed he'd been thrown on, his hand spreading

the blood on his forehead Patric rubbed his soaked hand on his dusty pants and sucked his lip. His father was pissed, but would leave him to think about the pain until his eleven-hour shift was done. He had time for his dream.

The bed creaking beneath him, he walked over to his tiny desk – more of a ledge, really – his bare feet slapping on the cold metal floor. With a scrape he pulled out the chair and flopped down on it, staring at the archeotech he'd found as he wiped away more blood. The archeotech that wouldn't let go of his mind; the archeotech that filled his mind with forbidden dreams.

The thing stared back, oblivious. It was like what old scratched video records suggested cats had been like. He'd never seen one, they'd died out long before he was born – though he'd heard rumors they still had them in the Inner City, but he had more chance of seeing Earth than that place!

Even thinking of lost Earth triggered the religious instruction they all received. He briefly bowed his head before returning his eyes to the archeotech. Perhaps not a cat, but *it* reminded him of something. The memory scratched as his brain like he imagined a cat would, but he could never catch it!

The construct's head was a skull, small, with naked black holes for eyes, and a kind of spike sticking out the front. Folded plastic formed a long neck that led to the body which was another fold of white plastic that let the archeotech sit level on the ledge. Stretching out to either side were more pieces of the white plastic, curved hinges holding them to the creations body.

He turned it over, and looked at the complex clockwork and electronics inside. He'd never seen anything like this, not in his schooling, not in any of the arcane life support machinery, not in any of the visions he had from the downloaded memories. He didn't begrudge the hard work down in the sewage reclamation plant. The youngest were always there, wearing heavy rubber suits with thick steel helmets, air creaking and grinding down long hoses and gurgling out the side through the thick ooze as they pulled scrap out of the pipes so that the goo could flow and be processed and reused. Endless hours of cleaning and tending; everybody did it. The life support and filtration systems that filtered dust and trace poisons out, and the vast gardens of old and mostly withered plants that recycled the air they breathed depended on them.

He'd found the archeotech down there in the ooze, sunken on the floor, half buried in a spot where the currents stilled and the silt settled. He'd

felt around, looking for the brush he'd dropped as the echoing clanking of the air pumps rattled around in his helmet. He'd found it, but he'd also found the tiny thing.

Even now, he didn't know why he'd shoved it into his belt, or snuck it past the supervisor after they'd clambered out of the ooze and gone through the showers. He remembered the long nights in the dim reddish light where he'd worked on it, cleaning it, meticulously remembering every thing he took apart so that he could put it back together. After his growing size had led them to move him to cleaning the hydroponic gardens, he'd stolen a tiny brush used to clean the nutrient ooze for the plants and polished and scrubbed every little piece until they glowed in copper and gold. He'd stayed awake late each night, fiddling with wires and springs, putting the little creature back together again. He'd stopped sleeping, nodding off on the job, his production had fallen off and they'd reduced his rations. But, he couldn't stop – he had to see what the thing did! Banging his head against the wall, pain would wipe away the dreams for an instant, but only an instant.

It was wrong, he *knew* it was, but he couldn't stop!

None of them knew, not even his father. He knew that if they saw this archeotech, they'd take it from him and drill him in his duties. There'd be no understanding from them. They'd see Patric's entire life laid before them, a daily routine of drudgery to keep what few humans were left on this dying world alive. Some said Feldspar was never meant to support mankind, and Patric often agreed with them. To survive, they each must labor to the day they died, just to keep the hope that one day Earth might return and rescue them.

Patric understood this, the memories made sure of that. And yet, as he stared at the strange device which had so captured his mind, he could not help but hope for something else too. Something beyond the endless drudgery in a rust-laden world.

And now he was here. With tired eyes he looked at the thing, wondering why it didn't work. Had it been a pipe dream? Running his fingers along the fine gears and pistons, he felt their polished smoothness. Why wouldn't it work? What had he done wrong?

He rubbed at the rusting blood between his eyes.

Looking at it, he realized that it'd been a waste. A complete waste. Like everybody else, all descendants of colonists abandoned on this forsaken world, he had to work to keep everybody alive. Slowly the ancient systems were failing, and it was only with everybody's eternal work that they could

stay alive, that those in the inner city could have the appropriate leisure time to rule over them wisely and well. With a scarred and dirty hand, he picked up the thing, glared at it. Hatred filled him as he stared.

He threw it across the room!

Before his astonished eyes, echoing through his astonished ears, the archeotech clicked and whirred. The plastic sticking off the side flapped up and down, it arched its neck, the plastic somehow curving like something alive. The sides became a blur, a buzz of movement and displaced air.

The thing stopped in midair. It cocked its head with a hum of gears, and looked at him.

It worked! *It worked!*

Sides— no, *wings* blurring, the construct whirred to the door and began tapping on it with its skull, its, its *beak!*

Patric danced. He *recognized* it!

It kept tapping as though it wanted something. What could it want? It was tapping – it was knocking—

It wanted out?

Was it going to lead him somewhere?

In a trance of dreams, Patric padded across the floor and opened the door, the ancient material scraping and creaking against the floor as it slid into the wall. With a whir and a buzz, and the clicking of gears, the *bird* whizzed out through the door and Patric ran after it.

Through corridors and along gangways and down stairs and up ladders he followed it. It would wait for him to catch up, its wings a blur as Patric climbed, huffing, up long rusty ladders, or crawled through dusty tubes. He'd long ago followed it away from the still habitable sections, and into the endless miles of abandoned passages and chambers, full of abandoned machinery, possessions, dirt and dust.

He chased it through a long dead arboretum, the plants that had once refreshed the air nothing but dried and desiccated stalks. It led him through a long hanger, thick with dust and oil, empty now of machines that were long lost.

Finally it led him to a hatch leading outside, where it hung and buzzed, pecking at the door frantically.

Outside.

Patric looked at the ancient door, a thick heavy hatch sealed to keep the poisons outside. According to legend, when humans had first come here, they'd tried to terraform the world, but something had gone wrong.

Maybe— Maybe this construct *knew* something. It was leading him somewhere. It had to be!

But, it wanted to go *outside*.

Only a select few went outside, and then only to clean the filtration vents. And even they went outside only once a month, and for barely an hour's time. Apart from them, nobody went, ever. Patric knew that in the past men must have at some point, but there were no stories, no memories, no legends, nothing.

The bird buzzed frantically, pecking loudly.

Patric licked his dry lips. Beside the airlock there was a heavy canvas suit, cracked with age. Spun carbon tanks hung against the wall with thick corrugated hoses that lead to a heavy face mask. Who knew how long they'd been here?

And yet, the bird had to be going somewhere.

He walked over and checked the tanks, one after the other. One after the other they showed empty, or the hoses were obviously cracked. But one—

It still held pressure, and the hoses looked good.

The earliest memories of childhood he had were dire warnings to never go outside, to never trust old equipment. His mind had been filled with memories to *not go outside*.

The bird pecked.

Patric thought about his life. About endless drudgery. Working to maintain slowly failing systems. Oh, they wouldn't in his life, but the day was coming. He would mate with an assigned wife, have his assigned children, and finally die and be recycled.

The bird looked at him, cocking its head.

He was still young, but already his body creaked. He could feel age creeping up on him like rust along the walls. He couldn't always see it, but it was there, and one day it would blossom and crack, just like his own body. The bird was a *dream*, a route out of the drudgery.

Was that why he'd spent so much time working to repair it?

Maybe—

Scratching his head, he thought some more. He looked back, back towards the work, and the cautious decay into old age. He looked forward, up at the bird, up at his dreams, the last thing that had captured his imagination.

He smiled and shrugged. It was foolish, but he pulled one of the ancient suits off its hook, dust and flakes of plastic falling to the ground. He clambered into it, the stiff material dragging and tearing at his flesh, at the dirty cloth of his bodysuit. The tank was heavy, the hoses cracked when he moved them. But he didn't care.

What did he have to lose?

As the bird waited he put the mask over his face, the cracked rubber pressing painfully against his bloody forehead and took a breath of old dried oxygen. It was cold, and tasted of bitter rust, and something else. The goggles of the mask were so dusty he could barely see. But he could see the bird. Tying the hood around his head, he walked over, the boots clattering on the cracked floor, to the airlock. It took all his strength to turn the valve, and it squealed its protest loudly in his ears, even through the suit. He breathed, valves clicked as air gushed into the mask to be inhaled and exhaled.

With a groan felt through his body, the door opened. The bird buzzed in and he followed, dragging the door shut behind him.

He wondered if he would die. The suit was old; surely it could not withstand the poisons that waited for him beyond the outer door. The bird pecked at the outer door, summoning him.

Patric licked his lips and with a heave, cranked open the outer door. His mind was buffeted by the howling dust, and already he could taste something foul on his tongue. The bird flew out before him, dancing like an angel in the heavy air. Motes of dust smeared his viewplate, as he beheld Feldspar for the first time.

The hatch led out onto a small platform overlooking a cleft in the dead volcanoes the Complex had been built into. Massive towers rose up behind him, their surfaces streaked with decay and corrosion. Before him was a ring of dead volcanoes, their stacks crumbling inwards, steaming between defiles of black stone. And beyond, he could see nothing, his mind filled with the roaring howl of the wind.

The archeotech danced around, fluttering along the platform, as if seeking an answer to a question he could not comprehend. And then it landed, looking up at him with its comical beak. Patric nodded smiling broadly. This was the reason he labored, but also the reason he dreamed that it didn't have to be this way.

For one moment, he felt only joy.

## THE PERILS OF WEREOSTRICHDOM

MELANIE NICHOLSON WALKED into the office bright and early Friday morning. She was hot, sticky, and tired. She had been working in this hick town for only a week, and it had taken her the entire week to finally to get the records, or lack thereof, organized. In fifteen years as a social worker she had never seen such a disaster. That's probably why the state office had sent her down to this county office to take care of things.

She flopped down into the old wooden chair that was the best there was to offer and picked up the first case she had to look into. She browsed through it to refresh her memory. It referred to a Mr Tim Corrigan who lived just outside of town. He had never married, but was raising three children. That would not have been odd except that every child was an orphan that he had found on his doorstep.

Melanie could accept one foundling, maybe even two, but three? She had already passed the information on to other authorities to check for missing children and had gotten their responses but hadn't had time to look at them. Now she did – there was no correlation. So, where were the babies coming from?

There was a creak as the office door opened and Melanie looked up and saw Miss Walters walk in, late as usual. She had been the sole worker here until Melanie had arrived.

"Why, good morning, Ms Nicholson! You're in early."

Miss Walters' cheerfulness never failed to get on Melanie's nerves, particularly first thing in the morning. And particularly when she was in a foul mood, which she had been ever since arriving in this hick town in

the middle of nowhere. She scowled. "Somebody has to get some work down around here."

Miss Walters, who had asked Melanie to call her Roberta many times, walked up to her desk. "Oh, come on, it's Friday. There's nothing that can't wait until Monday. I know some men that I can introduce you to...."

Melanie stood up and glared at Miss Walters. Every day she would try to hook her up with a guy; she seemed to think that being unattached at thirty was unnatural. Melanie had no plans to get married, or even to meet someone. She had a career to worry about. "As I have told you before," she began dryly, "I don't have any interest whatsoever in any men you might know. I have no plans to stay here once I clean up the mess you left. I care about my work." Melanie stared until Miss Walters turned away.

"I do care about children," Miss Walters whispered. "But I also care about others." She turned around and started walking to her desk.

Melanie remembered the case she was looking at. "What about Mr Corrigan?"

Miss Walters turned and looked at her.

"Don't you think it the least odd that he has found three babies over the last fifteen years?"

"No." Her answer was a whisper – almost, Melanie thought, as though she knew something.

"You've never gone to talk to him, to find out what is going on."

"No. You shouldn't either."

"Why not? What if he's stealing them from other parents? Is that good for the children you care about?"

This time it was Miss Walters' turn to glare. She stomped back and gripped the edge of Melanie's desk. "He is the best father anybody could want. His children are well behaved, and have never broken the law. They're happy."

"But if they're stolen, then their parents aren't. Shouldn't we find out?"

"You don't want to go there."

"Why not?"

"There are rumours...."

"Rumours?" Melanie's response was dry.

"There are strange goings on. People whisper...."

"And this hasn't caused you to want to check him out?"

"No. And neither should you."

Melanie sighed. "And why not?" Then her voice turned nasty, "I would have thought you'd be dying for me to meet him. He is unattached, I believe."



"Fine. Go. Don't listen to me. Go your own damn way." Miss Walters turned and stalked out, slamming the office door behind her.

Well, somebody had to check Mr Corrigan out and it looked like it was going to be her. Then she would have a talk to the state office about Miss Walters and see if they could get somebody competent assigned here. She picked up the folder and left and locked the office. Her car was parked outside; its bright cherry-red finish looked odd amongst the older cars scattered throughout town, most were a dull brown from years of dirt. She'd be glad when she was done here and could get back to Cleveland. She prayed she'd be sent somewhere else where the hotels had air conditioning.

EVEN THOUGH THE TOWN HAD only one street, and only one side street, Melanie still got lost twice trying to find the Corrigan farm just outside of town. She had a map, but it was at least as outdated as the records down at the office. She didn't mind too much, as her car had air conditioning. Eventually she found the entrance that was almost completely hidden by dried brush and saw the faded sign saying "Corrigan". She turned from the half decent gravel road onto a dried out rut.

She hoped her car wouldn't need too many repairs.

After a few minutes she pulled out in front of a small house and stopped. There were no cars, or trucks. The house itself was unpainted, consisting of two stories of sun-blasted wood. Beyond it were walled enclosures – she could see a pair of ostriches looking back at her.

*It figures – not even a normal farm.* She sighed, and turned off the car. The air conditioner died and she could hear the ticking of the engine. Time to go back out into the heat. She gritted her teeth and opened the door, the blast of furnace heat causing her sweat and to almost immediately soak her shirt. She walked over to the house and used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off of her face. Then she banged on the door.

And waited. There was no answer.

She banged again. Still no answer.

She looked around and shouted out, "Mr Corrigan!"

The heat ate her shout.

She sighed and started back to her car. She would have to try again on Monday. She knew she should have tried calling first, but she couldn't have stood another whole day of Miss Walters trying to match her up.

"Hello?"

She stopped and looked. There was a man coming to the house from the ostrich pens.

"Hello?"

"Mr Corrigan?"

"I'll be there in a minute!"

She stopped and waited. She had to wipe her face twice before he finally reached her.

"Good afternoon. Who do I have the pleasure of talking to?"

"I'm Ms Melanie Nicholson. I'm from Child Welfare."

He frowned.

"It's about your children."

He glanced around and then forced himself to stop. "What happened? Are they all right?"

"They're fine. But I need to talk to you about how you found them."

"Why?"

"There are some irregularities."

"But.... Why don't we step inside. I can get you some water and we can sit and work this out."

"Okay."

Melanie followed him into the house where it was a little cooler. She sniffed – it smelled clean but there was a faint odour she couldn't identify. They walked into the kitchen and Melanie took a seat. Mr Corrigan got two wooden glasses from a cupboard and poured two glasses of water from a clay pitcher that was in the ancient fridge. There was a loud rattle that made Melanie jerk in her seat, but she calmed as the sound quieted to a dull thumping and she realized it was just the old fridge. Mr Corrigan pulled the second chair out and sat down.

"So what seems to be the matter, Ms...."

"Nicholson."

"Sorry."

"It's about your children."

"Umhum."

"I understand that they were all foundlings left on your property?" She took a sip of her water.

"Yes. I talked to the appropriate government agencies and ended up adopting them myself when no one else would."

"That was quite nice of you. I can see a person doing it for the first one, maybe even the second, but...."

"I was a foundling myself. I wouldn't put my worst enemy in one of those homes."

Could he be kidnapping children to make up for his childhood? "That's quite understandable. But don't you find it the least bit odd that you have three foundlings?"

"I don't know what to say. It just happened."

Sure it did, she thought sarcastically. She needed to dig deeper. "But why? And you were always there, willing and eager to take them in."

"I told you why."

"So convenient that you were." Maybe if she pushed him, he would let something out. "Almost arranged."

"I don't like your tone. Ms Nicholson."

"Have you ever thought about the grieving parents of your children? About what it took for them to abandon their child?"

"Yes. Often. That's why I took them in and do my best."

"Did they come willingly?" Melanie's throat was really dry – it must be the heat. She swallowed the rest of her water.

"I don't know what you're talking about. They were left on my doorstep and I took them in. What more do you want?"

"I want the truth. Where did they come from? There is no way in hell that three foundling children were left here by chance. It simply isn't possible." He was starting to break.

"I'm sorry, but that's what happened."

"That's all you're going to say on the matter?" She knew he knew more. And she would find out.

"Yes."

"Then you leave me no choice but to bring in the authorities to investigate."

"You'd actually go that far?"

"Yes. I have to do what is best for the children."

"And their staying with a father they love isn't enough?"

"Not if they have real parents who are missing them."

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Ms Nicholson, but you leave me no choice."

She stood up to leave, but suddenly lost her balance.

He ran around the table and caught her. "Are you all right?"

She'd never felt like this before. "It must be the heat. Do you have someplace I can lie down?"

"In the living room. Let me help."

"Thank you."

He helped her walk into the living room. She lay down on the couch and couldn't stop herself from closing her eyes.

SHE AWOKE LYING ON A BED in a dark room – she could see some light coming through the window from the setting sun; she could feel nothing but the hot breeze on her bare skin. Bare skin? She tried to sit up, but

felt a sudden stab of pain in her shoulder. She turned to look but saw Mr Corrigan sitting, watching her. He too was nude.

What the hell was going on? What kind of pervert was he? *Wait. Be calm. Be calm and ask questions. Get information but don't let him get too close.* She managed to keep her voice calm as she asked, "What happened?"

"I'm sorry I had to make you faint – I have to protect my children."

It was just the heat that had made her faint – she knew it. But what did this have to do with children?

"Let me tell you a story."

"Sure." Whatever. Always give the madman what he wants and look for a way to escape.

"I was found by someone and they didn't want me. They sent me to a state run facility."

"You told me that already."

"Have you ever dreamed about changing, Ms Nicholson?"

She turned her head to look at him. *Remember, humour him.* "No."

"I did. I hoped to escape. I dreamed of becoming a wolf and fleeing into the wild. I would write down fantasies about it."

Melanie slowly moved her left arm to feel her shoulder. She could feel warm blood. What had happened?

"One day I thought my dreams had come true. On the night of the full moon I started to change. I kneeled and prayed, thanking the heavens. I could feel my bones shifting, changing. But instead of fur I grew feathers."

"Feathers?" Remember, humour him. She could make out the door just enough to see it was closed.

"At that point I still didn't care. I could live with being a falcon, or an eagle. I would still escape. Do you know what I ended up becoming, Ms Nicholson?"

"No."

"An ostrich."

Enough was enough. "Ostrich?"

"I managed to keep it hidden until I reached eighteen. Then I was finally released. I had read everything I could about ostriches by then. I took a loan and started this farm, long before ostrich farming even became popular."

"That's nice." She had to get out of here. She ignored the pain and sat up.

"There are lots of strange things about being an ostrich, Ms Nicholson. You become very possessive of mates, much more so than actual ostriches.

You can't tolerate other males with your wives. And you can't resist the smell of a female in heat."

She ignored him and tried to stand up.

"I found that out when I changed. I couldn't stop myself from going to the pens. Then I started impregnating my harem. I couldn't control myself. I even killed the other males, as competitors. When I regained my form I was frightened of what I had done."

She leaned out of bed, when pain suddenly wracked her legs. It was so bad she no longer noticed the pain in her shoulders.

"Your first time will be painful, but you'll get used to it. You'll even manage to get a little bit of control after a while. Then you'll be able to do other things too."

She felt the bones in her legs melting and collapsed back to the bed. She screamed out loud from the pain. She could barely hear him continue to talk over the crackling and rumbling sounds she could hear coming from her own body.

"For a while the eggs laid by my hens were normal. I checked very carefully, but there was nothing odd. So, each night I would join with my harem and mate. At first I couldn't stop, but then as nothing unusual happened, I came to enjoy it. I even found that I could control a hen once we had mated. Eventually I didn't even need to mate to gain control, but it was much easier once I had. Then one morning one of my hens birthed a human baby instead of an egg."

Melanie could feel her legs thin and harden. She felt her foot shrink and tear into two long toes. New bones formed and her legs bent in new ways. Her skin tore and fell to the ground in flakes as scales formed underneath it.

"What else could I do? I said I'd found a foundling and adopted it. It was my son, after all. I tried to stay away from my hens, but couldn't resist. I mated the next night. The next day I almost fled, fearing more children, but when my hens laid, there were only eggs. It stayed that way for another six years. Then, another baby was born. I adopted her too."

Melanie collapsed to the floor, her legs sprawled under her, bending in ways they never had before. She felt her claws scrape across the wooden floor, and felt the scales on her legs rasp her chest when they rubbed against it. She tried to lift herself up with her arms, but they began to melt.

"I was just as trapped as my ostriches and my children. My son found out what happened to me each night, and I found that I could change him to join me. I suspect he would eventually have been able to do it naturally.

Fortunately, I was able to change him back in the morning. So now I'm forcing the change on you – although I did bite you just in case the legends are true."

Melanie rolled onto her side and felt the remnants of her arms sucked partially into her chest. She tried to scream but couldn't. Her neck began to sprout and lengthen. It grew longer and longer, but couldn't support her head. Its growth dragged her face across the floor. But she didn't get any splinters, for her face had hardened and was sprouting outwards.

"Then you came. You wouldn't accept the foundlings, and I won't let you threaten my children. So I made you fall unconscious, and now you are going to become my wife."

Melanie screamed, but all that came out was a squawk. The pain finally resided and she just lay on the floor. She could feel the warm wood through her skin. Then, suddenly, her flesh felt as though it was on fire. She felt feathers starting to pop out and scrape against the floor.

"You will love me. Once we mate, you'll have no choice. Then you can be the mother to my children, and they will be safe."

Finally the feathers stopped. Melanie struggled to her two legs, and flapped her wings for balance. She looked and saw Mr Corrigan shrinking in front of her. She could see his legs melt and reform; she could see his neck start to grow.

She tried to run for the door, but lost her balance and landed on her chest. She managed to keep her head raised and managed to turn her neck. Mr Corrigan had finished changing and was walking towards her, in the fading light she could barely make out his head bobbing to keep his balance.

THE OFFICE WAS DARK AND EMPTY when Roberta arrived Monday morning. She wondered where Ms Nicholson was – she hoped nothing had happened to her.

The phone rang and she picked it up. "Hello, Child Welfare office."

"Roberta! I have wonderful news!"

"Ms Nicholson? Where are you?"

"You were right – I needed someone. Now I'm in love! I'm going to marry Tim Corrigan...."

## WOODEN DREAMS

SPLOOSH.

Skala's dreams vanished as icy water plummeted and doused her curled up snoozing form. It soaked her furry body, soaked her long luxurious tail that was curled all around her. And ruined a wonderful pleasant sleep.

Squeaking and shivering, she burst into wakefulness, squealing out a cacophony of curses in her native language, the only language worth speaking. In the darkness somebody fled, feet padding on the wood and vanishing into dimness as her eyes stopped blinking, as her brain caught up to her body. Water shivered through her fur, curdling against her skin, and soaking the hammock she was curled up on.

Spitting and sneezing, shaking her furry feline-like body, she tried to get rid of the worst of the liquid. Nails clicking on the floor she stomped over and grabbed one of the many towels she kept handy for mornings, rubbing herself as dry as she was going to get. After that it was brushing, a preliminary quickness that she'd have to fix later.

Why did she stay? The documents she already had would take the rest of her life to translate. All carefully photographed and catalogued in her 'comp. Why stay and get this every morning?

More and more, she was thinking it was time to go home.

*And lose the mystery and wonder of the unknown?* a part of her whispered. She ignored it.

After each of the first few dousings she'd tried giving chase, but by the time she was conscious enough not to run into walls or through closed doors, the perpetrator was long gone. She had suspicions, but no proof!

The group she was with was known for their exploratory and recovery missions of ruins loaded with ancient technic devices. Ancestors, she'd even gone with them into the edges of the vast wastelands – the majority of the planet away from the equator – where ancient war machines roamed. The massive weapons still followed ancient programs and destroyed any life they came across. She'd had hopes that some of the devices they'd recovered might give her some way of setting up defenses against the prankster, but the mindset behind their development was completely alien. It made no logical sense! The code was full of redundancies, false paths, backtracks, layers and layers and layers of patches and rewrites and kludgy fixes – some days she doubted she'd ever figure it out! And the written language—

Oh, she knew things existed to solve her problems. Nice, clean, simple, and logically programmed Miku devices. Miku was the name of her race, passengers of a colonizing ship that crashed fifty years ago. Devices that could photograph the perpetrators, stun them, and perform lots of other nastiness to get them to leave her alone! But the Miku could spare little tech on this primitive planet, as almost all was needed to repair the ship. It was their only way off this world.

Damn primitive barbarian aliens! All of them so much larger than her beautiful self. Water loving Otta with their sleek furred web-footed bodies. Slim and fragile Batalli with their emaciated forms, hollow bones, and webbed flaps of skin-wings joining their arms to their waists in long vanes, each downbeat feeding blood superchargers on their sides. Hungry and savage Lychandows, carnivorous canines with amazing storied noses and covered in thin gray fur with claws and shimmering teeth. Skwirls, tree dwellers covered in soft fur with acceptable tails that looked almost handsome. Others she hadn't met, but had only heard rumors of. And, the naked-ape descended Humaniti, which appeared to have uplifted all the others centuries ago before a revolt of their creations destroyed the high tech civilization that had existed here.

Or, so the records she'd found and was working on translating indicated.

Records consisting of things such as thousand year-old Ottaporn for Humaniti to chortle over—

Idiots! Twisted mind-confused morons and their annoying heavy gravity planet, and its thick and heavy humid atmosphere. Oh but Skala longed for what she remembered of home, and what Kantal, their destination, would be like. Places where air didn't ooze down your throat like thick algae



slurry, places where the air was decently dry, places where your weight was proper! Where you didn't have to float upon water that was so ubiquitous that you could be trapped into having to inhale it.

She'd been barely three when they'd left home. She'd never see it again, or their destination. But her descendants would.

But, for now, she had other needs—

Mostly dry, her fur in some semblance of order, she settled the earbead at the base of her left ear, positioning the linked mic near the tip of her muzzle. The 'comp that she strapped to her wrist did the work, recording her words and translating, hearing and recording theirs and translating. The 'comp was near indestructible, and was the key to her survival here. Without it she'd be shorn. The local primitives had a spoken language so full of logical inconsistencies, innuendos, lies, changes, accents, needless words, and utter illogic that she needed the complex memories and pattern processing capabilities of her 'comp to translate their barbarous mutterings into something almost comprehensible.

Rummaging through what clothes she had, Skala pulled out a loose lightweave pair of shorts, and wiggled into it. Damn primitive barbarians even had a nudity taboo! Ignoring her electrocatapult rifle, she slipped on her wooden-soled sandals, tying the leather thongs. She went clomping out into the narrow hall, her thick fur pulling and itching under the clothes she had to wear.

Ancestors, she'd nearly forgotten! Skidding to a stop, her sandals scraping on the polished wooden floor, she checked around her neck. Ancestors be praised, the necklace was still there! It'd been a gift from her companions, given once they'd learned of her entirely logical fear of the masses of water they traveled on top of. It was a reflection of their barbarous minds that they couldn't believe she didn't know how to swim in the crap. Water was for drinking! So, after a lessons that mostly consisted of throwing her in, they'd given her the necklace. They claimed it was magic, but that was patently impossible. Even though all the tools she had with her had failed to puzzle out just how it worked. Her current belief was that it was a relic from the fallen technic civilization that had bonded with her bloodstream, using micropore filters in the apparently primitive decorated plaques to pull water through and extract the oxygen. Tech. Not magic.

It was tech she'd never taken off since, though she feared the prankster might take it.

Feeling much safer, she went the rest of the way down the hall, climbing the short ladder to the top level of the small boat. The entire thing was

made of wood, artfully carved, with a small cabin towards the rear and a pair of open floor hatches leading to the cramped quarters beneath. A single triangular piece of cloth propelled the vessel, and the frightening huge expanse of water surrounding it glittered and shimmered in the early morning sun.

Kris, the Humaniti, said something in his overloud voice. Her translator heard it, processed it, and whispered in her ear: "Morning Skala! The sun is of fine temperature, and the water is glistening and bright."

As though the status of this system's primary weren't obvious! She whispered into the microphone, "Morning," and the alien sounds clattered out of the speaker on her 'comp. Kris was a strange one. Always rushing to look at the ancient tech they found, but then abandoning it. Like he was searching for something but never finding it.

"We should be arriving to-or-upon our intended destination of Southport in not too long."

Another in a long line of squalor-filled primitive native communities. Still, it'd be a change. Skala nodded, and walked to the back of the primitive boat, sitting on the lower railing facing inward, away from the deadly expanse of water. She wrapped her long tail around into her lap where she could cradle and stroke it. So much grooming to do! The muggy wind ruffled her damp fur, and the deck creaked alarmingly around her. The cry of gulls screeched above, and water gurgled and splashed as dolphins breached and squealed their happiness.

Skala loathed this world.

Claws clicked on the deck and she looked up at the thick gray form of Gandurr. He was one of the Skwirl, a truly massive specimen of one, and he stank. His odor was thick and musty. Oh, she knew that he washed regularly, or as regularly as anybody, but still! Her nose wrinkled as she looked up.

"Hey sitting Skala!" his translated voice whispered into one of the long pointed ears on top of her head. "You'll wildly enjoy Southport. Lots of females!"

Skala looked up. She just wished there were some Miku there. Ancestors knew she needed civilized company! And, she had data to share. Still, Gandurr wasn't a bad sophant, even looked in the vague direction of handsome. He was just a bit... unconcerned about his strength. "Morning," she whispered into her mic. "Kris stated we would arrive within a short time."

As his tail waggled, Gandurr leaned down. She stroked her own tail

faster. "Does Skala have the necessary need of a guide-or-instructor in recreation?"

Skala closed her eyes. She was pretty sure what Gandurr meant, but there was no way to work a better translation into the matrix without losses. The primitives used the same word for, at last count, eighty-seven discrete meanings. They even used it as a curse! She whispered a reply and the 'comp growled it out. "There is no need. I can take care of herself."

Gandurr shrugged and bounded off to fiddle with the ropes. How was Skala supposed to tell him that not only was she far too old for that kind of thing, that not only was her last season over twenty years ago, but that she could never take his thing into her? She shuddered.

Greethan, a Battali, landed. His body was lean as all his kind, and full of the energy required to fly in this dense atmosphere and annoying gravity. He stumbled over towards Kris, far more graceful in the air than on land. The two talked.

"Hey all!" Kris boomed out, and her translator translated. "Our arrival at Southport is set for two hours!"

And, as if on cue, Mistapatch, the resident Otta, climbed onto deck from the ladder trailing off the boat, and shook the water off his slick fur, making sure to get just an accidental little on Skala. She knew it was him dousing her each morning, but she had no proof! The Otta winked; Skala glared.

Closing her eyes, Skala whispered to her Ancestors to give her strength. Pressing the fine indentations on her 'comp with her claws, she pulled up the latest page of a diary from the destroyed civilization and went back to translating the insanity of the language.

When she'd relaxed a bit, she'd go back to her cabin and groom herself. Then get the other stuff she'd need for a wander through what passed for civilization around here.

SOUTHPORT WAS LARGER THAN SKALA EXPECTED, a sprawling madness of wooden and stone buildings, some up to four stories. Its harbour was crowded with sailing vessels crewed by Otta, though why Otta needed boats Skala wasn't sure. To sun? To keep their caught fish away from the sharks? Of course, even more Otta swam through the harbor. Skala shuddered. As the rest of her party lowered the big piece of triangular cloth, she leaned on the railing near the front. In the water a group of Otta wearing nothing but a slick skin of some kind around their waist were fitting harnesses over a trio of dolphins. On some unknown signal, the dolphins

started swimming, towing the boat towards a dock that was much too far out from shore for her taste.

But, when amongst barbarians—

Mistapatch dove into the water and frolicked with his own kind as Grandurr tossed ropes to the waiting Skwirl and Lychandow on the docks who tied down the boat. Kris came up to her and she waited for her 'comp to translate his words. "Skala, are you planning to go-or-tour the town-or-village? Would you like some company-or-protector?"

Skala knew that Kris wasn't bad, as barbarian primitive natives went. Odd, but – she needed time alone. Or, away from her compatriots. She whispered, "Skala will be fine. You require my return by sunset?"

Kris scratched his head before replying. The translator translated: "You sure? Southport can be a rough-or-coarse place. Be careful, be back by sunset and it should be good," whispered in her ear.

Skala nodded and waited whilst Grandurr put out the plank. They'd laughed at her at first, but after she'd tripped and fallen into the water and nearly drowned—

For primitive barbarians they were acceptable.

Nodding her thanks, Skala checked the pouch with the coins she'd acquired on her journeys, checked her dagger, and activated the inertial compass function of her 'comp.

SOUTHPORT WAS A SPRAWLING MESS of primitive life. Otta were most common, but Lychandow and Humaniti and Skwirl were everywhere. Of Battali, not a one. There were even some species Skala had never seen before. Something uplifted from a lizard or reptile, something from some kind of hairless mammal. This was such a strange world. Odors assaulted her nostrils, and people jostled and pushed by her. Animals honked and squealed as they lugged their burdens through the narrow muddy streets, and vendors shouted out their wares. An enticing scent attracted her and she followed it to a Skwirl selling hot pies. A quick scan from her 'comp confirmed nothing that would disagree with her, and she paid for it with a pair of copperish triangular coins. She had to double check the change as her instincts had never gotten use to the native's inexplicable base ten system. You'd think they'd use something sane like base eight!

The pie was hot, almost too hot to hold. It was greasy, too – filled with unidentifiable lumps of flesh and a thick gravy that dribbled and bubbled through her fingers. It was filling, though a bit bland compared to what she'd have preferred. Licking the grease and gravy from her hands and their fur finished the meal quite nicely. She remembered her one taste

of the drink the natives seemed to like as she sipped from the canteen of water at her side. Something distilled from grain or other plant base. Ancestors! The stuff had been positively vile, and she had no inclination to repeat her one test!

Skala pushed her way deeper into the community, keeping one hand on her pouch just in case of prying fingers. She wasn't looking for anything in particular, just taking in the sights, enjoying the melody of scents and sounds, and looking for anything that caught her eye. A few ports ago she'd picked up a glittering disc that was being sold as jewelry. It was some kind of ancient data storage device that she'd eventually been able to read. The result had been, as best she could get the timing right, a kind of music. Deep, melodious, starting with a clash of notes – *dum-dum-dum duum* – that repeated a tone lower before the piece boomed on its glorious way.

Oh, to have been here at the height of their civilization!

Memories drifted through her mind of what a real city was like. She'd been with her parents, getting ready to board the colony ship. Glistening green and silver towers were visible in the distance across the vast open space of the starport. The ground had shook, and her bones had rumbled, as unbalanced gravity waves lifted shuttle after shuttle up to the main port in orbit—

It was lost now. Gone like so much. Rubbing at her eyes, she hurried on, peering into shadowed stalls for anything that would distract her.

Somehow she'd wandered off the main street into a shadowed passageway, stopping in front of a stall. A curious place for one – maybe that was what had attracted her subconscious. A dog sniffed at a pile of trash, and a bird, likely a pet, warbled from some window overhead. The stall was dim, alone, small. Its door was closed, the only access a hole in the wall just barely low enough for her to see over. There was no sign of anything technological. No artifacts. Instead it had ornate wooden and bead masks, all gorgeously carved, glistening in the light from a flickering candle sitting on a shelf inside. They were not realistic, but highly ornate. The woods were various, and she could smell cedar, something resinous she wasn't familiar with, and many others. They weren't painted, but coated with some kind of shellac or stain that brought out the naked wood which came in all colors and grains. The beads were some kind of rough ceramic, their colors inconsistent and individual. Yet, somehow, when assembled into a single mask, the whole was greater than the parts.

And – there was – something—

Stepping up to the window, something tingled along her spine, and the hair along her back stood on end. She looked around, the ear without the

earbead flicking in irritation as her long tail twisted and wrapped around her waist.

Nobody in the alley, only the distant murmur of the main street.

A voice spoke to her. Turning, looking up, she saw an old Otta, almost pure white, speaking. His eyes were as white as his fur. Blind?

"The stranger detects anything of interest?" hissed in her ear.

She stroked the fine fur at the tip of her tail. "The masks. Did you make them?"

He looked at her for a moment, and then nodded. "The technique is ancient. The primitive superstition-or-magic-or-misunderstood-forgotten-tech has been passed down. They're the finest you'll find anywhere."

She blinked, thinking of the alternate translations offered. Her gut told her that magic was the closest to what he meant. But, magic was all fakery! Mistapatch had demonstrated some to her, but she knew it had to be some kind of forgotten tech he had hidden on his person. Or maybe something hereditary? Nanites passed from generation to generation during birth?

Forgotten childhood dreams whispered in her mind. Magic. She shoved them aside. Pah! There was no such thing. Still, she was certain that was the term he meant. So she asked, "Magic? In what way?"

Her translator spoke her request. The Otta scratched his head, possibly puzzling out the meaning of her 'comps words. Then he nodded. "My masks will change-or-convert their wearer-or-user into what they represent."

Skala blinked, her hands pinching the tip of her tail in shock. Change? Transform? And yet – but how? "That's not possible."

"Affirmative it is. Watch-or-witness."

With that, he pulled one of the masks off a hook. There was a band, some kind of animal gut, and he put the strap and mask over his head. The mask, like the rest, wasn't big; its size was close to that of a Miku's face. As he tapped a particular pattern against the mask, Skala's hairs stood on end over her whole body, a thousand thousand fingers pulling at her. Her eyes grew wide. She almost fell over, she was leaning forward so far. The Otta's form blurred, flowing like thick oil as his body lengthened, thickened, until something different was looking at her. It was nothing she'd seen, but it was what the mask he'd chosen had represented. Horns of some kind branched from the top of his forehead into a tree of twigs. His muzzle was long, his eyes dark and fathomless. His ears had moved to the side of his head, and were far larger, and his body was covered in a stiff brown fur with white belly markings.

He winked.

“Ancestors—”

Reaching up with a three-fingered hand ending in thick nails, he tapped a different rhythm on the mask. His features again flowed, twisting and reshaping, growing lighter and lighter, until the white-furred Otta was standing in front of her holding the mask in his hands.

“How much?” she whispered.

HE'D REFUSED TO HAGGLE, and she'd had to fight not to give up any of the tech she needed to get around in this world. At the end, it'd taken all the coins she had to purchase four masks. The Cervid he'd demonstrated – so named by him – an Otta, a Lychandow, and a Skwirl. The pattern to activate the mask was the same regardless of the form, as was the rhythm to reverse it. She'd practiced hard under his tutelage, devoting all her genetically enhanced intellect, and recording it in detail just to be safe. It wasn't hard, and it didn't have to be exact.

She had no idea how they worked, but she had theories. Her current top runner was some kind of holographic field that would be projected by the mask and make the wearer appear to be transformed. He'd been obstinate that it was a complete change, that these were not the cheap masks available elsewhere. But a complete change was beyond the bounds of possibility. If he was right, the only thing she could think of was some kind of nanite colony that rapidly dissolved and rebuilt the wearer's body. But where would the extra mass come from?

No! Illusion. Nothing more. Still – it had to be studied. And, maybe, she could use it to end Mistapatch's daily pranks. A secondary use, of course! She'd purchased them for the technological aspects that had to be studied! Really—

And they weren't magic, no matter how much the hidden part of her dreamed.

It didn't take long to get back to the boat following the whispered directions from her 'comp as she retraced her steps. The four masks were in a cloth sack that she clasped tight to her chest. Somebody did end up taking her money pouch, but it was empty anyway. The masks were beyond price. Mistapatch was the only one on deck, he waved at her and she nodded at him as she hurried down to her cabin. She'd puzzle these masks out, puzzle them out and prove there was no magic!

Her cabin was dark, the dim reddish light of the setting sun the only illumination. Skala latched and closed the door behind her, though that never seemed to stop Mistapatch. Pushing the scraps of ancient tech aside,

she put her bag on her small work table and arranged all four masks in a row. She pulled off her 'comp and earbead and mic. She stripped completely, scratching hard at the soft fur around her waist now that she could get at the itching. Then, she picked up the first mask, the Cervid. It was as she remembered it. With hesitation she put it down, and then ran through the pattern in her head. Pressing thin claws in the fine indentations on her 'comp, she tapped the rhythm on the table, and compared the recording of it to the recording of the Otta tapping it. Identical, or as identical as a Miku could make it. She tapped on the table the same pattern she'd been shown to deactivate the mask, and recorded and compared. Again identical, or as identical as a living creature could make it.

Gulping down the last of the water in her canteen, she lit her lantern from the flint and steel kept nearby. The flame was warm and soon steady, the sweet smell of oil and smoke wafting around her.

No time like the present!

She untied the sinew strap of the Cervid mask. The Otta had told her she could retie it around her head – nothing would happen until she did the ritual. Tail snaking back and forth she pressed the mask against her short muzzle and pulled it snug, tying the sinew tightly into the soft fur that sprung from the back of her skull. Then she let it sit.

She could smell the wood, feel the mask's weight pressing against her fur. She couldn't see through the mask's eyes – they were in the wrong place – but she could see the glow of the lantern through the thin wood.

Her heart beating fast, she tapped the mask in the remembered rhythm.

Nothing happened. Ancestors! The damn thing was a scam. The Ancestor damned Otta had—

And then her entire body tingled, as though electricity from a short in the power assembly of her rifle tickled through her. Her skin itched, but she couldn't move to scratch it. And then her body... changed. Her legs thinned and stretched, her feet pushed out of the sandals and clenched into thick hard nails. Her muzzle grew longer and longer as the mask flowed into it. Her eyes moved to the side as her face grew outward, her ears fell to the sides of her head. Her tail, her glorious tail, shrank and shriveled, collapsing down into a little thing that wiggled behind her.

And then it was done.

New smells assailed her, far richer than before. The burning of oil, the polished wood of the cabin, the thick salt of the water. Sounds assailed her as her ears flicked and twisted in ways never possible before. She could



hear footsteps on the floor above. The rapraprap of liquid against the hull, the creak of the frame of the boat.

But that wasn't all! The air was cooler, far cooler than it'd been. Almost as cool as what she remembered of home. And the air was thin, so easy to breathe! It was like home! It was glorious! It was—

—impossible! The air couldn't have changed like that, nor the temperature fall so fast.

And— And she could feel the floor distantly, as though wearing heavy boots. The new deer pressed a hand, a three-fingered hand, against the wall, and she could feel the pressure of the wood against the hard nail tips, but she couldn't feel the texture.

Ancestors! The Otta had been right! It had changed her! Completely, physically, impossibly! Nanites rebuilding her body? So fast? But how could she argue with what her senses told her?

She sat – or more correctly, fell – down onto the low hammock with difficulty. She felt her head – no horns. Were they only on the male? And... and....

And she knew it was all real!

Forcing her way through a thick firefoam of panic, she fought to hold on to sanity. How to end it? The pattern! She grasped at its memories in her mind.

It took four tries, but finally her trembling fingers replicated it precisely enough for the mask to restore her and fall off into her hands, the strap still tied.

She was seated, her tail wrapped around her, the polished wood of the mask held before her. Blinking, she stared.

SHE DIDN'T KNOW EXACTLY HOW LATE she'd been up. By the time she'd surrendered, she was just too fatigued to even think about checking. Besides, she could hear gulls outside which meant dawn was imminent.

All night she'd run every test, ever detector, every monitor, every analysis she had access to, on the Cervid mask. Everything – everything! – showed that it was wood, lacquered with some natural resin. That the beads were fired clay with a coarse glaze on them. No nanites. No sensors. No projection system. No power supply. Just like the necklace, not a blessed thing that gave any evidence of how it worked.

Maybe the damn things *were* magic!

She'd had to fight through her fatigue, and her dreams, to get to sleep. She was past breeding age, her children adults, expendable given her lack

of engineering training. It's why they'd let her go off alone to research the life of this world. Not a question of her skills, or intelligence, or loyalty, but a cold cost-benefit analysis of her criticality to repairing the colony ship.

Not that she minded. She'd spent far too many years as a mother, a nursemaid, a story teller.

Besides, she still had another forty or fifty years in her. Decades to dream. If only magic existed—

If only—

IN THE EARLY MORNING, through the locked door, in silence, the bastard came in again and— *Splloosh*.

"Think of something original, Ancestors curse you!" It was all she could sputter out as she woke up far too early on far too little sleep. And... and....

Great Ancestors! The masks!

Wide awake, she bounded over to the worktable and skidded to a stop, her claws digging into the wood. And they were there. All three—

Three? Otta, Skwirl, Lychandow.

Like a whirlwind she tore around the room, ripping things up, looking under the bed, under the blankets, in the closet, throwing the few clothes she had every which way, shoving techbits all over the table searching under them—

Nothing! Nothing!

That was it! No more!

Still wet, still dripping, she stomped over and picked up the Otta mask and put it on, or tried to. Grumbling, she took it off, untied it, and then put it on correctly. The tapping-rhythm exploded from her fingers like metal slivers from her rifle.

Again her body twisted and grew, the air thinned, the temperature fell to a comfortable level. With her Otta nose she could smell the reassuring salt in the air, feel the water all around her, and she knew she was safe. Now for Mistapatch! Her body was full of energy, so full she felt like she was about to explode. But, she was too angry to care. Every other time the Otta had fled before she could reach him, but not this time. Oh no, not this time!

It was early dawn when she got to the top level of the boat. The sun was still big, and apparently touching the water. The air almost glowered red. Around the boat, the liquid was like glass, and a thin mist drifted in patches along it. The only sound was the slight gurgle of water against the boat, the intermittent slapslap of the vessel against the dock.

Now, where was the Ancestor damned—

Ah hah! She saw him wearing a short pair of bright yellow cloth pants, tight fitting. He was half up the ropes towards the top of the centre pole holding the big cloth thing to catch the wind. "Mistapatch!" She ran, more bounded, towards him, tail bouncing behind her.

Mistapatch looked down. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" His tone changed. "Have we met?"

"This time was too much, Mistapatch! I'm going to kill you!" With her Otta limbs she was already up the rigging and could smell his salty scent, rich and masculine. And his surprise. And his fear.

"Who are you?"

"This is the last time, you mask thief! Where'd you hide it?"

"Hide *what*—" He must have seen the murder in her eyes as he leapt off the ropes, diving into the water, vanishing with nary a splash.

"You aren't getting away that easy!" Before she even realized what she was doing, she'd jumped off the ropes and dove in after him. Her entry wasn't as clean, but the liquid caressed her like her feeding children now grown and left behind. Not just her lips, but her whole body in a warm cuddle of friendship. She felt her nostrils pinch closed, another eyelid flick over her eyes, and scintillating bubbles gurgling around her. Now, where was he? In the distance movement, a flash of brown and beige and yellow, and she was off in his direction, kicking hard with her tail and legs. She wasn't sure if it was the body, the mask, or the necklace she wore, though she couldn't feel it, but she had no need to breathe. Nothing but a burning need to catch the damned Otta once and for all.

He was the better swimmer, but she was angry and tireless. He burst out a woosh of bubbles and surfaced, before diving again, and she followed, not needing to breathe. The chase went on and on, Mistapatch slowing and tiring until she could grab him. "Got you, you bastard!" she bubbled out, and then kicked to the surface as he struggled. They burst into the air, it was thin in her lungs, and she hugged him against her. "Mistapatch, no more, you hear me, no more!"

"Gah! Wha— Who are you?"

"Shut up, you bastard! I'm Skala, the little Miku you always douse and torture. But now—"

"Skala? But, how—"

"You've gone too Ancestor damned far! Where's my mask?"

"Mask? What mask? And how can you be Skala? And—"

"Where did you hide it?"

"Let me catch my breath!"

Skala glared. "Don't you dare try to run! I've got the same claws you

do, and I'm angry enough to use them." She waited, floating there. "Why every morning? Why?"

"Every morning? Hold it. If you're Skala—"

"I told you I was!"

"Masks? There's a story – masks that can change one – but they're myth!"

"Obviously not."

"But— Okay, okay. You're Skala! Whatever you say. I think I know part of what you're talking about. But— I've never done it! It's too simple, too obvious!"

Too obvious? It wasn't Mistapatch? "I don't believe you!"

"And maybe I don't believe you! But, I did things like put that extra pepper in your lunch. You remember that? You sneezed for hours!"

"You did that? You lousy Ancestor damned—"

"But I've never doused you with water! And I don't know anything about any judged masks!"

"By all my Ancestors, my eyes were watering for a week!"

"And, if you are Skala, you do realize that you're kilometers from the ship and from shore and surrounded by water?"

She looked around through Otta eyes. Great Ancestors – her heart almost stopped, and every civilized calm thought fled from her brain leaving only blind panic. Screaming and splashing in every direction. Lashing out. Kicking hard and gasping. Every breath was going to be her last. Every breath. It was everywhere. She was dead, dead! Something slammed into her, dug into her, but the liquid, the death was everywhere. Everywhere! It was foam, white foam, gurgling against her mouth. The thing slammed against her head, hard, very hard. Her head spun, liquid, liquid everywhere. Another slam, another. She was dead, so dead, so very dead! Dead!

SKALA AWOKE ON THE FLOOR OF THE BOAT, water dribbling off her Otta fur, and not dead. Not dead was a highly preferable state. Blinking, she looked up into the concerned face of Mistapatch.

"Maybe you are Skala—"

"Of course I'm Skala!" She pushed herself up and wiggled around him with dexterity she'd never had before, soon finding herself on her feet. "By the Ancestors, what happened?"

"You certainly sound like her. What happened? A strange girl chases me across half the harbour, and then screams at me that she's Skala and I stole a mask, not to mention dousing her with water every morning. And then you start drowning before my eyes. You should be drowned! I had to knock

you out so I could bring you back to the ship. It should have been too late, but you were breathing fine, and there was no water in your—”

“The necklace!”

“But you’re not wearing it! Even magic has rules.”

“Rules! It’s misunderstood technology, not magic!” She tapped the rhythm on her cheek and felt the familiar shrinking as she changed back into her proper form.

“But, how did—” His words fell into meaningless gibberish.

Skala pulled off the mask and felt the life-saving necklace around her neck. It was there – but not her translator! But... the necklace worked... and... and... the mask also translated – also gave her the language! But—

Forcing herself to concentrate on the immediate problems, she pushed past the gibbering Otta and ran down to her quarters. The other two masks were there, and her ‘comp and earbead and mic. She put them on as she heard Mistapatch coming behind her.

“—but you really are Skala! And that means the masks – the stories-or-legends-or-history of them and their magic-or-power-or-tech are true!”

Strapping her knife around her thigh, she grabbed a backpack and started packing her possessions, leaving the masks to last. Rummaging through the tech bits she had lying around, she took the most interesting pieces. The printed material had already been photographed and stored page by page so she could leave the originals behind.

Skala was going home. She had enough to poke at back at the safety of the crashed ship. Out of this... madness.

“Skala, what are you doing this time instant? Why are you packing-or-storing everything? It wasn’t me – it never was!”

Skala stopped and spun around, tail twisting back and forth. “What do you mean, it wasn’t you?”

“The water dousing. It was always Kris! He’d never done it before-or-in-the-past. Or to anybody else! It was like he wanted-or-planned to try and learn-or-practice the art of practical-or-effective joking!”

“It was always Kris?”

“The water was! But—”

She ignored the rest as her mind spun with questions. Kris had always been doing it? And only to her? That made no sense! He’s the one who’d talked the others into letting her come along that first time. Still, if he’d been the one, likely he’d taken the mask. She put down her rifle, and pulled out the Lychandow mask and held it against her muzzle even as she tapped out the rhythm. Her body flowed, growing thicker and heavier and bigger. She felt muscles she’d never had before. And then the scents hit her. An

overpowering sea of odor attached to everything, drifting around and over, full of tales. She could faintly smell her Miku self, the whiff of something like a faint pine musk – the Cervid? Strong odors of salt, of water, the thick musk of Otta, both male and female. The dark oily oddness and age of the recovered tech all over. The sweet scent of polished wood. A hint of smoke and oil. A faint whiff of a distinctive unwashed flesh—

If was overwhelming! So much information, so much data! Only decades of rigid discipline let her push it down, categorize it, as Mistapatch stared at her. The salt-odor was the liquid outside the boat. Her own scent was obvious. So was the distinctive Otta musk. Hints of a different musk, familiar, Grandurr. But the rest? She walked over to the biggest pile of archeotech, her footsteps heavy on the floor, thick nails clicking in a staccato rhythm in her ears, and sniffed. Not the same odor, but very close. Oil. Age. A hint of – fire? Which meant the unwashed flesh had to be Kris.

So he *had* been here!

“What’s going on, Skala?” and then she heard an instant later, “What event is occurring-or-happening, Skala?” The second had to be the translator. So, this mask gave her the language too.

She wondered if there were Miku masks out there— “Shhh! I need to think!” And an instant later: “Be without noise and sound as this individual known as Skala needs to net positively ponder mental issues.”

There was a colony of Lychadow near the colony ship – she remembered the one that had been like a brother to her. Known a feeble paleness of their scents in her youth, scents she could now smell in their full glory. The odor that was hers now, though there was an individual sweetness around it. She’d never believed the claimed acuity of sense, but now she had proof. And it was more than she’d hoped for.

Grabbing her rifle, she climbed back to the floor of the boat and made her way to the solitary cabin at the back. Kris’ cabin. She didn’t even bother to knock. The door was locked so she slammed her Lychadow weight against it, once, twice. With a crackle and twanging release the wood splintered, and she almost fell over the wreckage.

“What are you doing, Skala?” followed an instant later by, “What event are you possibly creating, Skala?”

The room was full of the unwashed flesh scent. Definitely Kris, so he had been in her room, which suggested that Mistapatch was telling the truth. Kris’ quarters were dark, the windows shuttered. As her eyes adjusted she could see a bed, an empty table. Going there she sniffed. A hint of polished wood – the mask! The same scent of ancient tech from

her room. Strong odor of Kris. And— And an overlay of something dark and oily, intermingled.

What was going on?

A horrible thought occurred to her. She ran over to his mussed up bed. Shoving her now massive muzzle into it she found herself drenched in Krisscent, and – and the same dark and oily scent she'd found in her cabin from the techbits. The same, yet different.

She'd never seen Kris without his clothes – could he be hiding something? A machine? A mechanical symbiote? Something that he used—

Or that used him?

Her Lychadow claws tapped the rhythm out on her cheek and her body fell into its normal shape as the mask fell loose into her hand.

"Skala, what the judgement-or-final war-or-ancient disaster is occurring here?"

"I don't know. Something. I'm quitting. I'm going to find my property and... and I don't know!" She turned to face Mistapatch. "Where's Kris?"

"He was here when you went after me. I don't know. Ashore?"

Stupid Skala! Stupid, stupid! Led on a wild wormhole chase. "The others?"

"Greethan, I don't know. He left last night. Grandurr is probably in town-or-community asleep-or-resting, surrounded by women, you know him."

What to do – what to do? Think! Kris had the mask. He'd had it in his quarters. Then he'd left, apparently with it. But – stupid Skala! She could track him by his scent!

Taking off her earbead and mic, along with the 'comp, she put them in her pack. Holding the Lychadow mask against her muzzle, she tapped the rhythm and felt her body grow and grow. There was his scent. Child's play!

"Skala, what's going on? Why are you leaving?"

"I will not stay with a thief! I'm going to track down Kris and reclaim my property, whether he likes it or not. You can come, or you can stay. I really don't care."

"Skala—"

"Not now!" She swung her rifle over her shoulder. It was so small now, so light, but slivers of steel accelerated outward were far more effective than even Lychadow claws or teeth. Not effective against armoured surfaces, but deadly against flesh and fragile machine components such as lenses. And accurate.

"Then I'm going with you!"

"Fine! Don't slow me down, and don't get in my way!" Fumbling around in her pack, she grabbed her 'comp and fumbled at the fine controls—Ancestors! She tapped at her muzzle, changed back, enabled the inertial compass, put the 'comp in her pack, and went back into the Lychandow form.

Mistapatch was staring.

Kris' scent was easy to follow, and she bounded after it on Lychandow legs.

"Don't you want to put something on?"

Skala refused to waste the time. Bounding down the gangplank on all fours, she ran into the town. The scent was much fainter, so many other confusing odors – but, she could still find it. Faint, but there!

"Skala, wait up!"

Let Mistapatch make his own way.

THE COMMUNITY WAS FAR LESS CROWDED than it'd been yesterday, but it was early. There were still plenty of carts being hauled to market, and all around the oily, salty stench of decaying fish heaped on wagons, along with the calls and cries and whistles and squeaks and howls and barks. Kris' scent grew fainter and fainter, and Skala often had to stop and sniff at the ground to try and pick it up. Somehow he'd known where he was going, but how? And... why did things look so familiar?

There were screams, women hiding the eyes of their children, calls for the watch, but most just ignored the prowling Lychandow and the Otta that bounded after.

Ancestors! It was leading to where she'd purchased the masks. But why?

Upon that realization, she fell back to all fours, running towards where she knew this was leading, the butt of her rifle slapping against her side as she kept pushing her shoulder up to keep the strap from sliding off. Every so often she checked the scent with her Lychandow nose to make sure she was right. It was getting stronger. Mistapatch vanished behind.

Turning into the alley, she came to the shop. The door had been broken open and she peered in, tongue hanging out as she panted, pushed out heat wavering before her vision. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but that gave her time to sample the scents. Fresh shaven wood, the slight saltiness of Otta, her own scent, a faint mélange of animal after animal, the sharp bitterness of shellacs and oils. Kris-scent everywhere, and that same hint of ancient tech.

Her eyes adjusted, and she stared at the Humaniti, shirt ripped off,



ransacking the shop, tossing half finished masks every which way to clatter on the floor, yanking drawers open and dumping their contents. Slumped in a shadowed corner was the white Otta. Was he still breathing? Could she afford to wait? Where had Mistapatch gotten to? Trying to move silently, she padded over, keeping a careful eye on the ransacking Humaniti. Yes, the Otta was breathing. Fine!

She stood up. "Kris!"

Before Skala could say another word, he spun around. His eyes – they weren't full of rage or hate, but full of frustration and stark terror. Almost beseeching her. His scent – his Humaniti scent – was full of fear. And the thick oily scent of age and... and... foulness. Skala didn't want to hurt Kris, she just wanted her property back! And – yes, some vengeance for all the cursed dousings!

Before she could react, his knife schlicked out of its sheath and he leapt towards her.

What the—

He was upon her before she could do anything more. She, in the Lychandow form, was bigger, stronger, faster. Somehow she grabbed his arm, the one with the knife, and put all her strength against it, holding the rich salt-blood scented point from her chest as he leaned into it. His body tensed. Metallic coils glimmered in the dim light, coiling around and around his arm and chest, forcing his hand down, closer and closer.

Some kind of exoskeleton? But— How could it concentrate itself like that?

Her Lychandow form could easily hold off Kris, but not the tech. What to do? She had her knife, hidden on her old body, wherever her possessions went. She had the rifle, but she didn't want to kill Kris. But—

Kris' arm jerked lower, the tip of the knife tickled her flesh. Sharp burning pain gushed through her.

Letting go with her left hand, she put her entire weight against the arm, but the dagger dug a little deeper. With her other, she scrabbled and tore at the metallic coils, but she could feel her claws glancing off. And when her flesh touched the thing, it stung, like an electric shock. The foulness of burnt fur stained her nostrils.

Electric – the battery in the power pack of her rifle! It was removable, for replacement, for connecting to the colony ship's systems to recharge. Maybe—

The knife jerked down, dug deeper into her flesh. Ancestors! She yowled, pain-fueled strength letting her push the dagger back a little, panting for breath. She could smell the hot salt of her blood, feel it trickling into her fur.

With her good hand she fumbled at the stock of the rifle. The catch, where was the catch? There – but the damn claws were too big. Too big! But—

The dagger jerked back down, hot stabbing agony echoing from her chest. She yowled, a long Lychandow howl of agony.

Desperate now, near panic, she scrabbled at the catch. It was there, it had to be! Something clicked, the panel released, the battery popped out. She couldn't recall what the voltage of the thing was, but it was high! Ancestor's luck it had better be high enough. Grabbing it in her good hand, her free hand—

The dagger jerked deeper, the blade half way to its hilt. Ancestors, it hurt! It hurt!

She jabbed the terminals of the battery against the metallic coils. Electricity crackled, ozone burning the air, and blue actinic light searing into her eyes. Fur burned. Kris screamed, she screamed, something screamed, and they were flung apart.

She blinked to clear her Lychandow eyes. Spots filled her vision. Light glittered – a pattern? It was a coil, shifting and moving, slipping off Kris.

“Don't you dare!” Forcing her mind off her blood dribbling onto the floor, she staggered forward, gasping for breath, fighting through the pain. Her arm reached out, her Lychandow paw clenching the battery so hard a part of her feared she'd crack the shatterproof case. And all her strength shoving, pressing, the terminals against the coil. Something screamed, high pitched, mind-searing. Her pointed Lychandow ears tried to flick away. More ozone. The coils whipped back and forth and she pressed the terminals of the battery against it again, and again.

Until it stilled.

The battery fell from her hand, clunking on the floor. She collapsed, the blood flow small but steady. “Help...?”

But where she lay... she stared at the thing. Still, smoking. And then, a panel moved – clicked open. And something – black, dripping blood, oil – plopped out. Legs slithered out from its body and it began to crawl away.

“No.... No, no you don't!” She crawled after it, unable to stand. The battery was out of reach. The machine thing was slow, but getting faster. With what was left of her Lychandow strength, she pushed with her hind legs and leapt, landed over the thing—

And slammed her fist down on it, shattering the casing, spewing oil and circuits onto the floor and into her fur. Then again, its weight thudding against the wooden floor, and again—

A VOICE SPOKE. GIBBERISH. She heard her name, but couldn't understand

anything else. Eyes blinking she looked up. Kris was there, some kind of cream slathered over most of his body, wearing only shorts. She'd never seen him wear only shorts. Mistapatch was there, and Greethan and Grandurr. The air was thick, almost a gel. A lantern was lit—

She was in her cabin. On her hammock, tail hanging down through a hole. Back to her proper self. "What happened?"

They just looked at her. Of course.

Mistapatch was the one who figured it out. He handed her the bundle of her 'comp and mic and earbead. She reached for it, and pain stabbed through her. Her fur, her gorgeous soft fur, half burned off. Thick cloth wrapped across her chest. As she reached for her translator she could feel flesh grinding under the bandages, could feel blood oozing out.

But, she had no choice.

She put the headset on, the earbead in her ear, the mic by her mouth. The 'comp she just let fall on the bed – it had the range.

Kris spoke. The translation whispered in her ear. "Do not conduct motion."

"What... what happened?"

Kris continued. "You reached near death killing-or-destroying the device-or-curse. It... it found-or-located me when I was young-or-child. Took me over, made-or-seduced me to do what it wanted. For years it used-or-manipulated me to seek what it needed-or-hungered for."

"And what was that?"

"I... don't know. Some kind of ancient magic-or-tech I think. It would teach-or-tell me how to go to caches-or-ruins that might hold-or-hide what it needed. It didn't want you. Feared somebody might discover-or-detect what it was. I convinced-or-argued it to let you join. Said that we needed-or-wanted you. That you could find what it needed. When it sensed the masks in your quarters it went frantic."

"Why—" She lowered her voice. It hurt to talk loudly. "Why me? Why the dousings? That makes no sense—"

"I... it... wanted to keep an eye on you. Keep you off-balance-or-distracted."

"And why the masks?"

Greethan muttered something and shook his head. Disbelief over what had happened?

"I don't know-or-understand. It – sensed-or-smelled them when you brought them. It wanted the source-or-maker. Thank you for stopping me, for destroying it."

That made no sense. Or... did it? The dousing kept her focused on

Mistapatch. Kept her focused on her work. But, why the maskmaker? “Is the Otta all right? The one who made—”

Mistapatch answered. “He’s fine. I got there and bound-or-healed his wound, and was able to bind-or-entrap yours. He gave you some presents-or-offerings. More masks. But not until you heal.”

“Skala,” Kris said, “you’re welcome-or-invited to stay with us. I’m... sorry-or-want-forgiveness for what I – what it made-or-ordered me to do.”

Skala leaned back, even that motion sending a stab of pain through her chest. So many mysteries here. Turning her head, she could see the coiled metal of the thing on her worktable, though she doubted that would tell her much. The part that had tried to flee had to be the brain, and she’d made sure to destroy it. But, stay? With barbarians... with friends?

She could go back, pass on what she’d found, retire in honour. And never know about magic. About the world.

Or remain—

“I’ll stay. For now anyway.”

They smiled. Mistapatch did a little dance. Grandurr winked.

“Not that way, you—”

They... laughed?

Moving slowly she touched the necklace. Saw the masks hanging on the wall. All four, with another four below them. A Humaniti, a... dolphin? Two she didn’t recognize.

Tech to be discovered.

Or, with friends... magic.

## THE SURVIVOR

“THIS IS LIEUTENANT KYROS IMBREOS of the Patrol vessel *Unity*. Your ship has been identified as the *Stag of the Night* belonging to Dalthyn Walwyntha. Cut engines and prepare to be boarded. Repeating, this is Commander Kyros Imbreos of the Patrol vessel *Unity*—”

Dalthyn cursed as the voice repeated, the nasal tones of a herbivore of some sort echoing in his ears. The Patrol ship wasn't large, a short range craft with a crew of two or three. But it was more than enough to deal with his unarmed ship. But it was a ship of the Patrol.

The Patrol— Dalthwyn hated the Patrol. Sure, he knew they were necessary. They were the only thing standing between civilization and atomic destruction, for they controlled all the weapons of war, all the bombs. Dalthwyn had always resented them, had always known that there had to be a better way. A way for civilization to survive without the threat of the gun held over them. But there wasn't, and the Patrol was here.

Great Maker but he'd been so close! Dalthwyn had contacted his buyer in code to indicate that the drug shipment was pending arrival. Hell, he'd even been counting the money that was going to go into his already bulging bank account. How had the Maker-damned Patrol fingered him?

For a second he thought about dumping the cargo, but the *Unity* was close enough that it would have no problem recovering enough to damn him to the mines on Luna for the rest of his life. If only he hadn't been so greedy that he'd loaded the extra mass of cargo instead of explosives to destroy the evidence. It wasn't as though he *needed* the money. He only smuggled these days to try and escape his boredom.

The words in his headphones changed. “*Stag of the Night*, this is your final warning. If you do not cut your engines immediately, I will open fire. You have ten seconds.”

Think, damn you! Think! As his nostrils gulped down the thick herd-scented air, he pressed the transmit key above his head. “Umm.... Patrol ship *Unity*. This is Captain Manwyth of the chartered vessel *Rich Lady*. I have a registered cargo of... medical supplies and filtration parts for Venusport. Ahh.... I’m running late – the goods are perishable. You sure you have the right ship? Over.”

As the lies spilled from his cervine muzzle, Dalthwyn was already plotting an emergency re-entry. His ship wouldn’t survive, but the burnup would take care of the evidence, hopefully. Venus wasn’t that harsh – all the stories he’d heard were obviously exaggerations. A peaceful walk through the wilderness for a few months, something different and interesting. After all, those stories about wandering in the wilderness for years were just horrible exaggerations. He’d show up as one of the prospectors and then access his numbered accounts. Enough to purchase a ticket back to Terra and a fake ID! Once there, a new ship, a new unbreakable ID — How hard could it be? He’d spent a weekend camping in a jungle preserve a few years ago—

Checking the course the astrogation system recommended, he activated the RCS jets and began flipping the *Stag of the Night* one-hundred-eighty degrees to begin an emergency de-orbit burn, running them far into the red. He didn’t know how long the Patrol bastard would wait before opening fire.

“*Stag of the Night*, I read your engine still live, and have visual confirmation that you are performing orbital maneuvers. Cease immediately, otherwise I will be forced to fire. Over.”

“Uhh.... *Unity*, I’m re-orientating to facilitate docking. I’ve beamed Venusport and warned them of the delay. I hope you’re willing to face court-martial when the medical supplies arrive too late. Over.”

“*Stag of the Night*, there is no medical crisis at Venusport. Cease your actions immediately! Over.”

A sharp one would catch him, and of course he’d drawn a sharp one. Checking his orientation, he confirmed that it was not quite right. Well, nothing for it. Dalthwyn grabbed the lever and yanked it hard, activating the main drive at full burn. All the improper rotation meant was that he’d just have to walk further. A roar shook the ship as the main drive rapidly ran up to its maximum of two point five gee, and then a bit over, deceleration pushing pushed him back into his padded chair, his tail pushed back

into the small hole that enveloped it. His teeth rattled in his muzzle, and he was glad he'd shed his horns before he'd left Ceres.

"*Stag of the Night*, you're falling out of orbit - your ship is not made for re-entry. I recommend you come about to... one-fifteen mark eighty-nine and—"

Dalthwyn's teeth clattered in his muzzle from the shaking of the ship, but he forced out, "You're breaking up *Unity*. Please repeat. Over."

The ship began shaking more as it scraped against the outer wisps of Venus' thin atmosphere. And some people believed that the precursors had terraformed it millennia ago. He snorted. It had always been like this, just like Mars had always been wrapped in canals.

"*Stag of the Night*, I read eighteen seconds till re-entry. You leave me no choice but to open fire. You must eject immediately! Over."

Damn that Kyros! Dalthwyn dragged his hand over to the ejection systems. He couldn't dump and destroy the cargo, but the ship had explosives in its hull to ensure its destruction. The explosion should scrag the cargo, and should scramble the Patrol's sensors enough for him to fall out of engagement range into the atmosphere. He grinned. It'd be one hell of a ride!

The ship shook, and half the lights on his controls burned red. Charged particles had just blown off his main drive, and hydrogen was venting rapidly. Why couldn't he have been intercepted by an incompetent Patrol officer?

As if there were such things—

"*Unity*! What in the Maker's name are you doing? My board's red, I read cascading overloads. Maker damn you!" Dalthwyn armed the destruct system and prepared the pilot capsule ejection. He'd have to burn the solid booster hard to get deep enough into the atmosphere in time; the Patrol would be able to track him. Dalthwyn's only hope was that the heat of re-entry would keep them from engaging him.

"*Stag of the Night*! Eject now! I'll recover you. Repeat—"

"Maker! Systems failing all over— Ejection system has red lighted. Repeat, red lighted. I hope the fawns you just condemned to death haunt your dre—"

Dalthwyn pushed the eject, and his control capsule blasted clear as the door behind him sealed itself against the Breath Sucker. Grabbing the stick, he reoriented the ship, his control causing the RCS in the capsule to fire. He ignited the main drive and the solid booster roared into life, shoving him back hard against his seat with almost five gee.

And then it was out of his hands. There was no way to stop the booster

once it was ignited. A countdown zeroed and buzzed, the explosives in the main body of the ship had just detonated.

*"Stag of the Night!* I read a successful command ejection. However, you're diving into the—"

The capsule shook, and Dalthwyn was bounced against the straps as the force of the destruction of the *Stag of the Night* reached him. Sparks burst in the capsule until fuses blew, and then he was coughing in the oily smoke. Grabbing the overhead breathing mask, he shoved it over his muzzle and sucked in the cold fresh oxygen. His body relaxed slightly as the comforting scent of other deer having passed nearby hours ago filled his nostrils from the emergency oxygen, even though his eyes were blinking in the smoke. All the controls on his board were red now. Then the booster burned out, and for a handful of seconds he fell free before the deceleration caused by the atmosphere shoved him against his straps. The capsule shook and rattled, tumbled and spun, but soon the air was thick enough that it forced the capsule's aerodynamic shape into re-entry orientation. Deceleration mounted, and Dalthwyn was pushed hard into his seat, his neck sore from the recent jerking, the oxygen from the mask cold and harsh in his lungs.

*"Stag of the Night* respond! I read you falling into the northern hemisphere. I mark your landing zone as roughly fifty degrees east of the meridian. I'm alerting Venusport authorities; they will send search and rescue.

"I hope you live, Dalthyn Walwyntha. Spectrographs of the detonation of your ship confirm large quantities of the interdicted substance Squirrel Ecstasy. I hope you're ready to rot, you bastard!"

"Screw you!" Dalthwyn screamed out as the heat of re-entry cut off all communication.

The violent buffering, the extreme heat, all drove Dalthwyn into unconsciousness.

DALTHWYN WOKE UP ROCKING back and forth in the padding of his chair. His body was soaked with sweat, and he sucked at the cold oxygen in his mask desperately. Since he wasn't in free fall, he knew that the chutes had deployed. Pulling himself over, he looked out the soot-streaked window. The mask pulled at his muzzle, its hose stretching; his sweat soaked shipsuit squeaking against the damp leather padding of the seat. He could feel the heat billowing from the transparent plastic as the control cabin rocked with his movement.

Through the window Venus stretched out. A thin layer of high altitude clouds were above him, and deeper and thicker piles of cotton billowed



below. Piercing them here and there were the barren mist-enshrouded highlands of Venus; glinting through the odd gap were the brilliant green jungles and glistening topaz swamps and lakes of the lowlands.

With a click and a hum now that the exterior pressure was great enough, a fan switched on, sucking the cool air of the high atmosphere into the capsule. Quickly, the interior pressure thinned as the cabin cooled, but Dalthwyn continued sucking cold oxygen through his mask. The cables to the chutes creaked and groaned as wind pushed the cabin to a slight angle.

More comfortable now, Dalthwyn sat down, his wet clothes clinging to his fur, and forced himself to a level of calm. He could do nothing until the capsule landed, and then, he'd have to act quickly. For a second he looked at the radio, thought about transmitting, but then resolutely switched it off. He'd stay free, make his way back in a few months or so, and then buy a new ship. He grinned. Certainly he wasn't bored this time!

Another ten minutes passed before the capsule slammed into the ground with a loud bang and crunch, along with the creaking and groaning of tortured metal and plastic. Cables snapped in the wind, and the parachutes whipped and tugged. With a groan the cabin tilted, and then scraped along the ground, pulled by the parachutes, before banging to a stop. Wishing he could take the oxygen tank with him, Dalthwyn pulled the wet mask from his muzzle, his damp fur sticking to the rubber as he yanked it loose. Oxygen loudly hissed from it. The air was cold and thin, and his lungs sucked and gasped, fighting to get enough to breathe.

Dalthwyn didn't have much time. VTOLs from Venusport could be here any time, depending on where exactly he was, and he couldn't wait for them. He stood up, his cloven hooves slick on the flooring beneath him, and pulled himself around the command chair that had tilted slightly to stay upright in Venus' nine-tenths gee. Now, where was it— Dalthwyn felt around under the chair and pulled out the survival kit. After that was the blaster on its belt, and all the batteries for it he could manage. Pulling a yellow lever, explosive bolts fired, and the hatch blew off letting the cold mist fall into the cabin. Dalthwyn clambered out, wishing he had some water somewhere. The wind grabbed at the parachutes again, and the capsule groaned and scraped. Dalthwyn grabbed at the seat to try and stay on his hooves. He could feel the capsule skittering beneath him, and then, with a bang that made him fold his ear against his head, it slammed against a rock and stopped.

Dalthwyn burst out and bounded out onto the frosted soil of the Venusian highlands, rapidly putting distance between him and the capsule.

He didn't have much time. The cold soil scraped and slid beneath his hooves, and he could feel his hoof lobes stretching and twisting as they skittered on the sharp broken rock. Around him the light was dim, everything was shrouded in mist; behind him he could see it curdling and twisting away from the still cooling hull of the capsule as though it was afraid to touch. He continued running and scrambling over the rocks.

Surrounded by nothing but the whining of the wind and the distant mellowed snapping of the parachutes, Dalthwyn staggered to a stop. He leaned over, resting his three-fingered hands on his upper legs, against the cold wet material of the shipsuit, gasping for breath, misting the air with each exhale. His muzzle hung open, and the thin wet air was sucked in and out from his desperate lungs. His sweat was cold and caked on his fur. But, he was free.

Shivering, but feeling a bit better, he sat down on the rocks and pulled the survival pack off his back. The water condenser-purifier was neatly packed away, and he put it out and switched it on. It hummed, and began pulling water from the air and purifying it. He stripped out of his soaked shipsuit, throwing it away so that it landed with a wet splutch somewhere in the distance, and pulled on the insulated bodysuit that was folded in the pack. Then he reached in and pulled out a high calorie nutbar and started crunching at its hard layer, the sweet taste and scent of acorn filling his nostrils. Slowly, his body warmed and his breath calmed.

That was when he realized he was alone. There was no sound, no scent but his own, no voice. It wasn't like in space, it was— He snorted. He'd been alone, he'd always been alone. And yet.... He sniffed, and for the first time felt that *maybe* he should have surrendered. No oak trees, no hints of other herd members having passed by—

He was alone.

Involuntarily he shivered, and not from the cold.

Something boomed in the heavens and he involuntarily looked up. Dalthwyn couldn't see anything, but as his ear twitched he realized that it was a sonic boom. For a moment there was silence, and then he heard the growing roar of engines from off the distance. He couldn't tell exactly where it was as it echoed and bounced through the mist, but he could sense the general direction.

It was the VTOLs from Venusport come to capture him.

For a second, just a second, he was tempted. There was an inertial compass in the survival kit which would guide him back to where he'd started. Away from the barren plain of rocks. Back to warmth and companionship—

Back into the hands of the Patrol.

The great Dalthwyn would not end his days in the Lunar mines! He picked up the water condenser and gulped down the warm liquid it had collected. Then he slung it over his sweat-soaked shoulder to continue its work, finished off the nutbar, slung the pack over his shoulder, and began walking, his hooves clacking on the broken rock. Using the compass he headed north.

He just hoped they didn't have any cervines that could track the scent he was leaving from the glands between the lobes of his cloven hooves.

ACCORDING TO HIS WATCH, Dalthwyn spent a week on the plateau before the mist finally burned off. That was when he remembered that the Venusian day lasted months. The ground was rough and broken, but the protective suit kept him warm. Thought his hooves grew worn, they fortunately didn't crack. One morning he awoke, stiff and sore, and saw the crystal clear thin air and the scattered rock all around him. The sun was huge, far too bright to look at or even look near. For the first time he could see where he was, and that was when he realized the Maker had abandoned him.

All around was rock. Bare, naked rock covered in frost that was slowly melting as the air warmed. The temperature must never fall below freezing until near the end of the night, otherwise he'd be waist deep in snow. Of course, that might have been better as he wouldn't have gotten far enough away from the Patrol to escape.

He had maybe a month of rations left. No radio – that was in the command cabin. Scratching his legs he sighed, slowly rubbing warmth back into the cold and sore muscles.

He may be screwed, but, by the Maker, he wouldn't go down without a fight! He'd fought off carnivores, ultravores, drunken wolves in a bar. For a second he grinned as he remembered the wolf who called himself Wanderer, and the puns. But then, the sterile air, silent but for the faint whistle of the wind through tangled rocks, brought him back to the present. He refused to let Venus win. Staggering to his hooves he sipped some water, and then spasmed in his throat and began chewing cud. Supposedly Venus was crawling with life – so where were the blasted jungles?

Looking around, he blinked in the glittering light, and realized that the ground was sloping downward. Maybe he could get off the mountain and down to where the life was. That was it! Get off the highlands and into the jungles and swamps. Easy!

Filled with renewed hope, he started walking downhill, stepping carefully on the rocks so that he rarely slipped. He kept the fastest pace he could

manage over an extended period in the thin air and tried not to think of what would happen if he didn't find a way into the jungles.

In the silence he remembered reading of continent sized plateaus of rocks, barren and lifeless. He *had* to be on one of the smaller outcroppings, or near the edge. He forced himself to *believe* he was.

If he wasn't, he was dead.

THREE DAYS LATER, BY HIS WATCH, he arrived at the edge of a cliff. Stopping, he looked down and out upon Venus. Thank the Maker he *was* at an edge, and before him was a broken sea of scree and tortured paths that led down, far far down, into forest and then into the mist-shrouded jungle.

He had a long way to go. Sighing, he resumed walking.

The way down was not easy. There were dead ends, cliffs he had to detour around to find a way down if they were too tall. Though he had rope, he couldn't climb down. There was only the one piece of rope and if he used it, he'd never be able to get it back.

FROM HIS SHADOW, HE THOUGHT the sun was higher, but he wasn't sure. Why had the Maker made planets so damned *big*! Venus only had a circumference of something like forty thousand kilometers—

His legs ached, his hooves ached, his lungs ached. A sneeze burst its way out through his nostrils, splattering droplets onto the still cold ground. The air was thicker, it had to be, but he couldn't tell. He'd already used one powerpack in the condenser—

"*Fuck!*" His voice echoed off nearby cliffs, fading until he could only hear the thin wind.

It was then, when he wasn't paying attention to where he was stepping, that it happened. The left lobe of his left hoof was pressed upon a small sharp rock. The tip snapped, he stumbled, wobbled, and then fell. Although he managed to catch himself with his arms so that the sharp rocks only tore the surface material of his bodysuit, it still hurt like hell. A sharp stabbing pain exploded from his left hoof and oozed its way up his postern and burned his lower leg. Screams, his screams, echoed, the sound loud and shrill and lonely.

For a while he lay there, gasping, until the pain faded into a dull burning. Tears burned in his eyes, piercing the fur of his muzzle with icy coldness. As his breath slowed he blinked them away, wiped the dampness off his muzzle and along his forehead, touching the scar where his right ear had once been. Before he'd lost it in a firefight with the Patrol.

Maker damn them!

Pushing himself up, he rolled around and sat down, feeling the cold on his behind even through the insulated suit. Pain stabbed up his leg at that slight movement, and even more when he grabbed it and pulled it around to look at the hoof. Both lobes were worn, rounded at their tips. He'd been cleaning the dirt and stones out of them, but this was the first time he looked at them, really looked at them. Their once sleek blackness was gray, peppered with tan dust. A bead of crimson blood stained the left lobe. Afraid of what he'd see, Dalthwyn licked his finger and brushed the dust and blood away.

There was a hairline crack.

*Fuck!*

With his right leg supporting his left, he reached into the survival kit. He remembered that there was something.... Yes. A small bottle of a thin liquid cement to repair such damage. It wasn't perfect, and he would have to reapply it every few days as growth caused it to lose its grip, but it would allow him to keep going.

Realistically he should rest and give his hooves, the cracked one, the general wear and tear on the others, time to heal, but he was running out of food. He had to keep going. Giving the glue the minute it required to set, he looked in the small pouch and pulled out a tight strap. This would be far easier if he was an equine, but he wasn't, and the kit makers had known that when they prepared the cervine version of the emergency supplies. He wrapped a small plastic strap around the damaged hoof lobe and then used the screwdriver in the kit to get the strap nice and tight.

This solution would, at least, allow him to keep going.

After putting everything away, he heaved himself back up onto his hooves with a groan, and continued on his limping way.

TRAVEL WAS SLOWER AFTER THAT. Every other morning he re-glued the crack – he couldn't tell if it was shrinking or not. At least it didn't seem to be getting worse. Each step became a pain, his hooves were thin, worn, and he was spending more and more time feeling rocks against the soft parts between his hoof lobes. Time became a blur. He slept when he was tired, woke, walked until he could walk no more, and slept again. He became gaunt. The rations kept him alive, but they weren't quite enough to replace the calories he was burning.

As the rations grew fewer, Dalthwyn reduced himself to half portions. He was walking slower. Even worse, the glue in the survival kit was almost gone. When it was gone he'd have to stop, or he'd quickly become lame. But then, he had no choice but to continue.

Then he scented salvation!

Slowly clomping his way around a cracked and worn outcropping of rock, skidding slightly on the scree piled around it, sniffing at the air, licking his nostrils, he followed the pine scent. Followed it like a bloodhound until finally he saw it. A tree.

It was a small tree, all alone, stunted, maybe two metres high.

But it was something! And it was something he could *eat*!

Oblivious to the dull pain in his legs, he jogged down towards it. The rocks thinned, and there were patches of a thin sandy soil with some kind of moss-like growth. When he trod on the moss he tore it, and a cloud of dry spores and a bitter dry scent rose around him. To him the scents, bitter, dry, pine, were glorious, rich, and intoxicating. Any scent other than his own was a gift from the Maker.

Falling to his knees on the rock strewn sand, he shoved his dry and dusty muzzle against one of the branches, and tore the needles and hard bark off, crunching it between his teeth. It was bitter, hard, dry, almost tasteless.

But to Dalthwyn it was the most wondrous ambrosia. It didn't taste of acorns.

DALTHWYN SPENT A LONG TIME by the tree, so long that he ate it practically bare. His stomach wasn't happy, his cud was bitter, but for once he was thankful that all life in the solar system seemed to derive from a single genetic source. The trees were not quite what he'd known in the asteroid farms, or on Terra or Luna, but they were more than close enough to sustain him. The rest gave his hoof lobe time to heal, and gave his body the same.

It also gave him time to realize how truly alone he was.

But, he'd been alone before, and would be alone again. He was a survivor. He'd survived a youth amongst the triads as a hunted slave, he'd survived the raid and rescue by a ship of the Patrol. A ship that dragged him away, proving to the Triads that he would never be tough enough to work for them. He'd survived explosive decompression, exposure to vacuum.

And, by the Maker, he'd survive Venus!

The sun continued to slowly rise, the world to slowly warm up. Before he'd quite killed the tree, he burned off a branch with his blaster, trimmed it, and made a staff to help him walk. More glue, the strap, and he continued on his way.

The ground grew sandier, moss more and more frequent, until it covered everything. Scents grew more and more numerous. The pollen of flowers, the sweetness of new leaves, the trill sharpness of tiny life. There were trees here and there, all pine, scattered, small, scrawny, but they were food. He

scented and heard and saw hints of squirrels and birds in the trees, but nothing on the floor of the forest. Moving slowly, Dalthwyn gave his body time to rest and to heal. The ground grew softer, the trees denser. Deciduous started to replace the conifers. It was three months by his watch before he ran across a stream. It was small, but clear, and bitterly cold.

He let it lead him on his slow journey to the lowlands as it headed generally north.

THE TREES WERE FAIRLY DENSE around him and he was walking almost entirely on pine needles and dirt when he scented deer.

For a while he didn't notice it. The scent was not threatening; instead it was comforting, inviting. It was like coming home. Instinctively he relaxed, and didn't realize why for the longest time.

And then he came upon a doe grazing. Instantly his blaster was in his hand, aimed at her.

She stopped, lowered her head, and then jerked it up. She looked at him, her tail half raised.

He stopped and stood still, holding the weapon steady.

She snorted, and stomped each of her forehooves, one after the other.

He'd seen wild deer in the parks on Terra and had paid close attention as they were supposedly distant ancestors of his own kind. Dalthwyn could see that the doe was pregnant, though not close to term. The male was long gone.

With a blur of motion she waved her tail high, bounded away, and was gone.

Dalthwyn relaxed, felt the tension slide out of his muscles, slowly lowered his pistol and flicked the safety back on. He slipped it back into its holster, snorted, and resumed his slow pace through the slowly thickening woods. Oddly he was happier, not so alone. They were only wild deer, non-sentient, but they *smelled* right.

That night, like all others, he didn't make a fire. He had not matches, and he didn't want to waste the power packs of his blaster just for warmth. The sun was still up, and the world was slowly growing warmer. That, his fur, his bodysuit, all kept him warm and comfortable. With a yawn, he sat down, his back against a tree, and nodded off.

SOMETHING WOKE HIM. It was still day, the world seemed unchanged. He licked his nostrils and inhaled. He could scent pine faintly, the spoor of the deer, the cold sweetness of the water.

And there was something— It was coarse, bitter. Licking his nostrils he exhaled and sniffed again. And it was—

With a screeching yowl, something leapt from the tree above him.

Years of living in fear, of struggle, kept Dalthwyn from panicking. Instead he spun away, hand leaping to the grip of his blaster and drawing it.

But, as fast as he was, the creature was faster. It landed on him, a blur of splotched tan fur and claws and teeth. Claws tore into his bodysuit, and into his flesh. Teeth dug into his shoulders and chewed up towards his neck.

Without conscious thought, Dalthwyn flipped off the safety and blasted its skull once, and then a second time, even though it was already dead.

And then there was silence, except for the wind in the trees.

He snorted to clear the stench of burned meat, the coarse bitter stench of the carnivore, from his nostrils. With a groan he pushed the corpse off.

All around him rose the scent of alarm and panic, and he could feel his tail pulled up tight against his spine, pressing against the bodysuit. His breathing was rapid, but slowing.

Dalthwyn forced calm to flow through him. He could scent nothing else around him but the dead and the faint traces of deer. He was armed; he was safe. Stripping his bodysuit off his upper body he dressed the cuts with antibiotics from his bag, and then put the bodysuit back on. The tears were unfortunate, but it was getting warmer, and most of his body was still covered.

Calm now, Dalthwyn began gathering underbrush, fallen branches. He cleared an area of ground and built up a small fire. Setting his blaster to its lowest setting, he fired into the pile of tinder. Instantly it burst into flames. He flicked the safety back on and grabbed the pack and pulled out the utility knife.

Then he began skinning his kill. It was ugly, messy, bloody. The stench of death, of meat and blood, overwhelmed him. Goo and slime poured from organs as he cut into them. Half the meat was covered in guck from inside the thing, and Dalthwyn couldn't make himself touch them. But some of the meat was good, and, unlike the wild primitive deer, he could eat meat. Dalthwyn wasn't an omnivore, but he could stomach it. And he was tired of the bland fare of leaves and nuts.

As the fire settled into coals behind him, he cut what meat he hadn't spoiled in his naïveté. One small piece. And then another, and another. He broke long thin branches off of the trees, stripped their tips of bark, and stuck the shards of bloody meat onto them. Holding them over the fire, he heard and scented the rich fat dripping into the flames that hissed and crackled. And then he ate.



The meat was tough, hard, charred on the outside and barely cooked on the inside. But the juices were sweet, and after months of his bland diet, the little taste the scraps did have was rich and succulent.

DALTHWYN CONTINUED HIS DESCENT. The air was thicker now; his breathing was comfortable. It was getting warmer, and eventually he cut off the torn and partially shredded top half of his bodysuit and went bare. Life became more frequent and the air grew thick with scents. Sharp tangs or fruit and nuts, oozing hints of decay, strong bitterness of predators. He spent time scouting during the day for clearings, and he spent his rest inside them. Each night he made a fire – it didn't take much of a charge, and the small use was far less than he'd use to kill a predator. He learned to trust his ears and his nose more. The felines seemed to be tree dwellers, they didn't bother him in the clearing. He came across the spoor of a wolf pack, but it was old. He became more wary.

The ground became damper. Underbrush grew thick and heavy, and his pace slowed. He moved away from the river he was following, and often had to detour around brambles and growths. Life became overwhelming. The trees changed, becoming thicker and higher. He began to have to detour around bogs and marsh, and they became more frequent. Again he needed to use his water purifier. The Maker alone knew what was in the bog water. His pace slowed, but he had lots to eat. The deer traces faded, but other herbivores replaced them. He couldn't see the sun anymore, just the leafy canopy above. And it rained, almost every day. The heat became oppressive, thick and heavy. Breathing became hard, the air oozing up and down his throat more like a liquid than a gas. He stripped the bodysuit off entirely, and still panted and sweat all the time. The wild deer didn't go down into the tropics because they couldn't sweat. Lucky them. Sleep became hard, but he adapted.

The ground became damper, with every step water oozed out, soaking his hooves. Dalthwyn just walked slower, carefully, using the staff to stay upright. Time passed, and the endless soaking started to rot his hooves. They grew soft, his legs grew sore, but he refused to stop.

Coming across a small lake, the water green and glistening in the brilliant sun he hadn't seen for a month, Dalthwyn stopped. According to his watch, he'd been on Venus for five months. The sun was close to noon. All around bird chattered, insects hummed. Something splashed in the water. The lake wasn't wide, and looked shallow. As the underbrush was thick and dense, he decided to try walking across the lake.

He placed a single hoof in first, his left one, healed but now rotting. The

soft ground had allowed it to grow thick again, and his leg muscles were hard and tough. There was no pain. The bottom was a soft thick ooze, his leg sunk deep into the cold goo, and he wiggled the two lobes as the mud slithered between them. Finally his hoof found hard packed clay. Checking, he found that he'd only sunk down into the bottom fifteen centimetres or so. If the whole lake was like that, he'd still make better time than through the underbrush. And the water was cool and refreshing.

He stepped in with his other hoof, and began a slow careful pace across the lake. Fish scurried around his legs, their fins brushing against the thick fur of his legs. He'd taken two more steps when he felt something bite his leg.

Stopping, he looked down. It was a fish, almost circular.

And then the water began to boil.

As if by magic, more of the same fish appeared around him. Each would nip in, dig out a chunk of his flesh, and then dart away. Dalthwyn didn't stop to look. Screaming in pain, he turned and ran. The ooze at the bottom sucked at his legs, the fish bit and tore. Some leapt out and grabbed chunks of his thighs. Drawing his blaster, he flicked off the safety and set it to its second lowest setting. The trigger was soft, and the water boiled around him even more, burning and scarring his legs.

As fast as they'd come, the fish vanished, leaving behind the bloated bodies of their boiled compatriots, and blood.

He staggered to shore, his legs scarred and bleeding, blood oozing out through a hundred tiny bites. With his mind a haze of pain, he fell on the shore. Some part of him made him fumble through the pack and pull out an antibiotic and inject it. And then he fell asleep.

Somehow he survived. He awoke hours later, blood staining the ground around him. Each leg was a screaming bar of pain. Swallowing three painkillers, he injected more of the antibiotic. Then he poured the clear water from the purifier over his legs, the pain a blinding white that washed out his vision and almost made him pass out. He poured a salve over his legs, and then wrapped them in every bandage he had. Gasping, he had enough presence of mind to fire at the nearest tree, the setting high. It began to steam, and finally caught. Only when it was burning did he stop and fall back into sleep.

When he awoke, the tree was a smoking tower - the upper branches hadn't burned and didn't even know they were dead yet. The other trees hadn't been touched. Rain drove from the sky, peppering the lake with droplets, but only heavy drips of water fell from the canopy above him, splopping into the dense ground cover.

Dalthwyn knew he was feverish; his stomachs gurgled and clenched. The bandages on his legs were caked with blood and gore. Through blurring eyes he read the instructions in the first aid kit and injected and swallowed everything that could help him. He gulped some water through his hot heavy lips. He knew that he couldn't stay here. He needed to move, to find some kind of shelter, some place he could defend.

Somehow he dragged himself on to his hooves, even though his legs screamed in fiery agony. He shook, shivered in the steaming rain, but took one step. And another. And another.

He made five steps before his body could take no more. He fell to the ground, blood oozing through the bandages on his legs.

LIKE THE OTHER INNER PLANETS in the Solar System with an atmosphere, Venus had its own indigenous sophants. These were called by themselves, quite unimaginably, Venusians.

Unlike all other sophants, they were amphibians, though that classification was not wholly correct. They were warm blooded, and they suckled their young.

It was a small band of hunters that came upon Dalthwyn's dying body. Through his fevered gaze he saw the group of green-skinned, long tailed, hairless frogs approach him, their bodies painted in brown and tan patches for camouflage. Somehow he managed to bring up his blaster, his nostril wrinkling from the putrefaction rising from his own legs. But his hand shook, and his swollen thumb couldn't flip the safety off.

The Venusians gathered around him, chittering and squeaking. Most kept a wary eye around them, but the leader crept over and ran his long thin fingers along Dalthwyn's body, along the large curve of his skull, over the velvet covered buds of his antlers, and along his legs. The Venusian was remembering the instructions given to him by the elders.

Dalthwyn screamed out loud when the fingers touched the puffy flesh beneath the oozing bandages.

The leader chittered and chirped to the others, and they chittered back. Four of the Venusians grabbed Dalthwyn - two by his arms, two by his thighs. Two more carefully grabbed each of his hooves. The leader pulled something from a coarse skin pouch and rubbed it along Dalthwyn's legs, and he immediately relaxed and the pain faded to a numb dullness.

The group turned and quickly carried their cargo out of the jungle, across the shallows of the lake as the leader poured some concoction into the water ahead of them and the fish fled. Then the leader pinched Dalthwyn's nostrils shut, and they all ducked under the surface and vanished.

The only thing left behind was bubbles, and a few splotches of cervine blood.

BY THE TIME THE VENUSIANS got Dalthwyn to their colony, he was in bad shape. The antibiotics he'd taken had helped, but nowhere near enough. Fungal growths already littered the damp bandages, and spores had taken root inside the wounds. He hadn't noticed it, but the same fungal growths had infested his clothes, his skin, all of his belongings.

Life in the swamps on Venus grew fast.

They chattered amongst themselves, examined him, and decided that they had little time before the sentient's life would pass to the Great Maker. Soft gentle hands carried him to a soft bed as others fetched the healers. They came, took samples, mixed concoctions, and chirped sadly.

The form was badly adapted to Venus – it would never survive. Steps had to be taken if he was to serve the needs of the elders.

They chirped and chattered as aids removed the caked and stinking bandages. Drawing knives and calling for specific concoctions, they went to work.

DALTHWYN WOKE UP IN A DOMED CHAMBER lit by a dull greenish glow from the walls. He breathed easily; after so many months the air was cool and easy in his lungs, its overbearing humidity gone. The only thing he could scent was himself, and his scent was of health. The only entrance that he could see was a pool of greenish water that made up half the floor. He was on a bed of dried reeds and moss, and there was some kind of thick fungus coating his legs and hooves in a single large cocoon. There was no pain. He was naked.

Panic blossomed in his blood, his heart thumped faster and faster. His head whipped around, his breath pulsed, until he saw his blaster in its holster against the wall, along with the rest of his supplies. All were speckled with fungus and mold. Closing his eyes, breathing deeply until the urge to panic flight had subsided, he returned his attention to the stuff coating his legs. Touching it, he found that it was cool and dry. It was scentless, but felt like a fine wood. And it felt just as hard.

There was a splash that echoed and tinkled through the chamber, and the slick green body of a Venusian popped out and onto the shelf beside him. Water splashed onto him, and his nostrils pinched shut as a drop touched his nose. A faint scent of fish, of green life, of dampness, filled the dome.

He stared at the Venusian, and the Venusian stared at him. Then it

nodded, put what looked like a gourd beside him, and then another beside it.

“Hey!”

It slipped back into the water and, with a gurgle and a handful of bubbles, was gone.

For a moment Dalthwyn sat there, watching the fading ripples, and then he snorted, his breath loud and lonely through his nostrils. One of the things that had kept him alive for so long was to not try and change the unchangeable.

And in this case, nearly immobilized in a room where the only exit lay through the water, there was not much he could do but wait. With a little fumbling, his hand grasped the gourd, his fingers gripping the smooth polished surface. And so did something else, some kind of film between his fingers—

Slowly he brought one hand up to his muzzle and cocked his head to examine it.

His fingers looked the same, but – maybe – they were slightly longer. And, there was indeed a fine web joining each of the three fingers. Slowly he turned his hand around, the light becoming tinged with red as it pierced the thin film. He sniffed at the film, and could smell only himself. His nostrils brushed the film, and he felt the film with his nostrils, and his nostrils with the film.

What was happening to him?

He breath pulsed in and out through his nostrils. Did the air feel different? Were his nostrils shaped differently? How the hell could he know? Dragging himself over to the wall where his blaster was hung, he grabbed it, letting his fingers, their... webbing, caress the worn ivory. The charge still showed at eighty-one percent, and, after flicking it to its minimum setting, he fired it at the pool of water, and there was a satisfying explosion as the superheated water burst into steam.

At least it worked!

Dragging himself back to where he'd been, the green reeds crackling and rustling underneath his sleek fur, he sat up. Carefully putting the blaster down beside him, safety on, he picked up one of the gourds. Inside it something gurgled. The thing had no handle, a nozzle but no obvious cork or cap. It was fairly obvious where and how it should be drunk from, even though there was no opening. For a moment he debated leaving it – it could be poisoned. But, if they had wanted to kill him, they could have done it far easier. And they had left him his blaster.

Unless they didn't know what it was—

And what if the liquid would brainwash him?

He looked at the innocuous brown and green-splotched gourd.

If they needed him to drink something to condition or brainwash him, then they could just as easily wait until he was unconscious and pour it down his muzzle.

He sighed, and with not a little trepidation, put the neck of the gourd in his muzzle and bit down. The material was smooth and hard, like plastic, but warmer and smoother. His teeth made no impression in the material. His tongue felt around it, felt its smoothness, felt a very faint fine grain. It certainly seemed something grown.

When his tongue touched what seemed to be the nozzle, something cold and sweet gushed upon it. He gasped, and instinctively swallowed. More liquid gushed out through the sealed nozzle, and he swallowed some more. It was rich and thick, more a syrup than a liquid, and it was ice cold.

Yanking the gourd out of his muzzle he looked at it. It was still smooth, featureless, and the nozzle was still sealed. He touched it with a finger and it was perfectly dry, not even damp from his saliva.

What in the Maker's name?

He looked at it. There was no way liquid could be passing out of the gourd. And there was no way it could be cold. No way!

Still, when in Neyork....

Putting the gourd back in his muzzle, he sucked at the rich, thick liquid like a baby sucking at a doe's teat. It was cold and filling, and settled in his chest comfortably filling up the first of his stomachs. When nothing more came out to his sucking, he tossed it into the now still pool. It flew through the air and skipped across the water, and thunked into the side of the hole with a hollow clunk. And then it floated, slowly spinning. He took the other gourd and it was filled with the same liquid. He emptied it and tossed it to join the other.

Dalthwyn sighed and lay down to sleep, keeping one hand on his blaster. He wanted answers, and the next visitor would give them to him.

DALTHWYN WAS SLEEPING WHEN the next visitor came; whether or not it was the same one he couldn't tell. He'd dozed off but was awakened by the tinkling of water and the splash of droplets on him. Before he was awake he fumbled for his blaster – it wasn't where he'd left it – there it was – grasped it, drew it, and aimed.

The Venusian crouched there, just looking at him, water dripping from its sleek scales to the floor. The creature was not reptilian, but was instead covered in sleek, glistening green skin, fading to pale yellow along its belly.

A mottled pattern of dark brown and green splotches were scattered over its back and head. There was a dark fin running down the centre of its muzzled head, its eyes were large and yellow, and a long sleek tail hung into the pool of water. Its hands were long and thin, the fingers tipped with tiny claws; its feet were thicker and webbed, and more heavily clawed. It carried another gourd.

It looked at him, breath pulsing in and out of its nostrils, its muzzle slightly open revealing rows of fine pointed teeth.

"Who are you?" Dalthwyn asked.

The creature blinked, and then burst out with a long string of chirps and squeaks.

Dalthwyn frowned, shook his head, and started running through the other languages he knew. First the various racial languages, then some of the communication codes used. Each time the Venusian just looked, and chirped and squeaked.

Digging into his memory Dalthwyn remembered the theories of an Intelligent Origin of all the sentients in the system, and dug scraps of an old old language he'd taken in school. A language believed to be a primary lingual source for all the tongues known to be in common use within the Sol system. <You what be?> Dalthwyn finally worked out, and gutturalled through his muzzle.

The creature cocked its head and looked at him from one eye. It blinked, and then slipped, or fell, backwards into the pool and was gone.

"Wait—"

It was too late. The Venusian had even taken the gourd with it.

For a while Dalthwyn cursed, his words echoing around him. The sound was odd, hollow, constant. It did not change as he turned his head, or as he flicked his ear—

Dalthwyn realized that he had no ear to flick.

Sure, he'd lost one in his youth, but he'd always kept the other. And now—

Keeping one eye on the pool, he reached up and ran a hand carefully along the top of his head. There was nothing. Nothing but sleek fur. No ears, no scars, no holes— Hell, even the buds of his antlers were gone.

What in the Maker's Name had the bastards done to him?

A shape burst out of the pool and slapped onto the floor, spraying him with water. Dalthwyn dropped his hand and held his blaster steady. Murder gleamed in his eyes.

This Venusian was definitely different. Its body was no longer sleek and glistening. Even wet, its hide seemed wrinkled and dry. Its colours were

faded, and its skin fell lose over a skeleton he could easily see. For a moment it looked at him, eyes large and old and wise, so large that Dalthwyn could feel himself sinking into them.

The creature spoke and broke the spell: <Know ancient tongue. Words passed maker.> Its voice was slow and hesitant, dry, and it squeaked on some of the consonants. Yet, it was understandable.

Dalthwyn shook his head for a second to gather his thoughts. That class had been so long ago, and he'd never paid that much attention. Yet, his memory had always been sharp, and he had used it once or twice as a source of code phrases. <Badly. Why harm?>

<Not suited. Dead. Made fit world. Made better.>

Dalthwyn's rage burst out of him in Solarian, the common tongue developed after the last war for ease of use by all species. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

The Venusian was unperturbed at the outburst it couldn't understand. <Stay here. Learn tongue. Teach. Time heal.>

What did it mean? Stay here was obvious, as was learn tongue. But teach? What did *he* know? Dalthwyn had never heard of anything that could have changed him – webbed hands, nostrils that pinched shut, ears that vanished.... And "time heal". Did they think that in time he'd forgive them? Little did they know!

Dalthwyn stopped and cocked his head in thought. He'd never let his rage control him, and it was easy to push it down now. He was trapped here, and at their mercy. Venus *had* almost killed him. There were secrets here. Why was the Patrol keeping them secret? What would they pay him to maintain their secret?

Dalthwyn grinned.

If he was stuck here, then he'd have to learn the language. And then he'd learn the rest. He rubbed his hands together, and then formed a reply in the old tongue. <Teach meanings.>

<Much learn,> the Venusian replied, before beginning to teach Dalthwyn their language.

TIME PASSED; HOW LONG, Dalthwyn never knew. His environment never changed. The light was the same, the air was always fresh, the moss he slept on always clean and new, though he *knew* he had soiled it. He ate and drank from the gourds brought to him, chewed his cud, and learned. Gradually he grew comfortable enough to leave his blaster in its holster.

He'd learned enough of the local tongue to be understood, when his



teacher came to him with another elderly Venusian. The flesh on the other one had been painted or dyed, and a snaking pattern of red curled around on his back.

Dalthwyn pointed. <Who?>

<Clicksquealclickclick medic. Fixed you.>

<Here, why?>

The elder who had been teaching him scratched at its head a moment, and then pointed at the cocoon encasing his legs. <He *squeeeeeeek* take off. Check.>

The medic looked at him and spoke: <You *click* feel no pain. *Squeclick* move.>

<Not receive last.>

<Still,> the elder said.

Dalthwyn nodded.

As he watched, the doctor reached into an ornate shining pouch on a belt that crossed his left and pulled out what looked like a slug, though it was rounded almost into a sphere. Dalthwyn tried to back away, but with his legs bound he had to drag himself and it wasn't near fast enough. Holding the slug thing over top of the wooden cocoon, the doctor squeezed it. Liquid dribbled out, and pattered onto the wood which began to smoke.

It was a thick smoke, huge gray clouds that wafted and drifted up as the centre of the cocoon dissolved into nothingness. Just the smoke, though there might have been a fine transparent liquid that slid down the floor and into the water. The smoke was not bitter or dark, but it was rich, and scented of oaks and acorns and fresh leaves and shoots. The doctor put the slug away as the last of the liquid dissolved the centre of the wooden cocoon so that his two legs were once again separate. As the smoke rose, billowing and curling along the top of the dome, Dalthwyn could see the inner half of each of his legs, with the porous spongy material surrounding them. Then the doctor reached down and lifted Dalthwyn's left leg a bit. There was no pain. Then he grasped the wood, above and below Dalthwyn's leg, and gave a sudden yank. The material cracked, the sound a tearing and ripping and then a creak as fibres groaned. It split revealing Dalthwyn's leg.

But it was not Dalthwyn's leg.

As the doctor repeated the procedure on his other leg, Dalthwyn could just stare.

As it had been before, his leg was still covered in a fine fur, brown, and it ended at a glistening black cloven hoof. But there the resemblance ended.

Extending from his knee down to his hock was a thick blade of flesh, not naked but covered in the same hair as his leg. It ended a few centimeters above the top of his hoof. Somehow he could feel warm air on it, and a slight dust from the broken cocoon. His other leg was the same, though opposite.

Dalthwyn squinted, there was something not quite right about his hoof— Then he realized that it glistened far more than it had, glistened as though it was wet, or covered with some kind of oil.

The doctor bowed, and, after gathering up the four pieces of cocoon, slipped into the water.

“What— How?” Dalthwyn sputtered out in Solarian, but then the stern gaze of the elder made him try again. <How fix?>

<Medic used old *squealclicksquee*. Bred by the Makers. We remember the *squeeclick*. It rewrote your *disqueek*—> The elder tried again at Dalthwyn’s stare of incomprehension, <Your life— Bodies. It made you *squeak* for Venus. The way the Makers bred us.>

Dalthwyn shook his head, concentrating on the language he was still struggling to learn. <Not have words. Tell all me later. I want learn.> What he could do with this off planet.... What the Triads would pay! If he could understand it. A part of him was hesitant though – he remembered what had happened to the Venusians in the north—

<Dalckwee, come *click* me. I will take you to *clickclicksquee*. Then you begin to learn. I will take you to our *clickclicksquee*.>

Dalthwyn raised his arm in a gesture he had mastered, due to much practice, to indicate that he didn’t understand. <How take? Take where?>

<Follow. *Squee* make clear.> And with that, the elder slid backwards into the water, leaving behind only ripples.

Dalthwyn just stared. He couldn’t swim, had never learned. He knew of some cervines who could, but it was a struggle on the surface, a fight that lasted as short a time as possible.

And now the Venusians wanted him to go out into the unknown, away from the air. He couldn’t!

He looked at his legs, at the blades – the *fins* they now had. He pinched his nostrils shut with a thought, felt his smooth head. They had done things to him. Somehow they had changed him. Adapted him for Venus. Had they done to him what the Great Maker, what the Precursor civilization had done for them? Had they kept those secrets which the other races had lost?

The prize was too valuable.

The elder poked its head up, exhaled air in a woosh, and looked at him.

<Follow. You will be safe.> Then the elder ducked back under in a swirl of greenish water and a few bubbles.

When in Neyork—

Filled with trepidation, Dalthwyn pushed himself up onto his hooves. Standing was awkward, and his legs were weak, but not as weak as they should have been. He had to duck under the roof.

A drop of water fell from the roof and onto his head. And then another.

The dome had *never* leaked before!

Dalthwyn looked up, and he could visibly see the smooth pearly surface curdle and crack. More water began dribbling in.

What in the Maker's name?

Water dribbled onto his muzzle and he closed his eyes, but could still see.

What else had the Maker damned Venusians done to him?

The flow of water into the dome was remaining at a steady dribble, but he felt the water rising along his fetlocks and... fins. Looking down he saw that the dome was rapidly filling with water. He splashed over to where he'd been sleeping and grabbed his blaster and secured the belt around his waist. He grabbed the backpack and slung it over his shoulders.

The water was up to his thighs.

It seemed he had no choice but to trust what the Venusians had done to him.

Looking down, he saw the face of the elder looking up at him from below the surface, below the hole that presumably led outside.

Nothing for it.

Dalthwyn could smell his nervousness, could smell the scents of danger and panic he was giving off.

What if those fish were here? What if they came in after him? But they weren't hurting the Venusian—

The water was up to his waist. He took a few steps towards the hole, and could feel the pressure of the water on his fins.

Taking a few deep breaths he leaned forwards, almost falling into the rising gurgling water. It closed over him, seeming to suck him under. Instinctively his nostrils pinched shut, his eyes closed, but he could still see. Clearly. He heard a gurgling from his back and sank a bit deeper; turning his head he could see a last few bubbles sliding out from the pack he was wearing.

At least the blaster was water tight.

He had no urge to breathe, no panic, no sense of discomfort. The water

was warm and smooth, almost silky. Almost like the manicured body of a doe pressed against him. He tried a couple of kicks and moved through the water faster than he'd have thought possible, almost hitting the far wall.

And still no urge to breathe.

He could feel the air in his lungs, could feel a slight tightness, but there was no need, no panic. He knew he had lots of time.

The elder poked its head up through the hole into the water now almost entirely filling the dome. <Clicksqueal up! I can't wait for squeak.>

Dalthwyn tried to speak, but all that happened was a few bubbles tickled and oozed their way out of his nostrils.

<The medics couldn't do a full *squealsqueak*.> With that the elder curled around and slipped back out the hole.

The dome was full now, except for a few bubbles twinkling along the ceiling. The internal light was beginning to fade, and Dalthwyn could see the dome material becoming spongelike as it rapidly decayed.

With nothing for it he pulled himself through the hole, his webbed hands grabbing the greenish liquid. A few kicks and he was through and into the open water.

Unlike the stories he'd been told about swimming, the water was not a dim frightening place, but a glowing green world lit by shafts of sunlight. All around were domes of various sizes, some gleaming and new, some older and covered in growths. Cables or vines anchored them to the bottom. Here and there Venusians swam around them moving through the water with ease. Some were carrying things, some just moving. He could hear the squeaks and clicks of their language echoing through the water.

But it was strange. Although it was beautiful, it was flat.

And then it hit him. There was no scent. None. Not a one.

Of course there wasn't, he was under water, his nostrils were sealed. And yet—

His lungs twitched, and he knew that his time here was not limitless. Looking around he quickly found the elder waiting for him a short distance away and began awkwardly swimming towards him.

<Kick your legs together,> the elder said, and demonstrated.

Dalthwyn tried, and it was easier.

It wasn't far through the glistening water as the elder led him deeper and to a larger dome, this one covered in growths and mosses until it was almost a part of the bottom. His lungs pinched a bit more and he thought for a moment of making for the surface far above, yet his need wasn't urgent. So he followed. He could feel his legs, his fins, churning the long weedy undergrowth as he followed the elder into the dim light beneath

the dome, and finally into the hole at its bottom. The shaft was short, and led upward to a steady greenish light.

His head burst into the air and his nostrils opened as he exhaled his spent air with a woosh before drawing in the fresh air inside the dome. Without the grace of the Venusians, he dragged himself out of the water and felt it stream off of his slick fur. His eyes opened, and he blinked, and closed his eyes that suddenly worked as they had for so many years.

And then he just stared.

Unlike the dome he'd been in, this one had a second level, and maybe more – an ornate carved wooden ladder led up to it. There were doorways, covered with some kind of green matting, but the walls—

The walls were shelves, and on the shelves were stacked and rowed books. But they were not like any books he'd ever seen. The books were thick, some approaching a third of a metre. And they didn't look like paper or leather, they looked like ivory or polished wood.

And there were hundreds – nay, thousands.

Were there more upstairs?

<Dalckwee, welcome to our *clickclicksqeee*. Here you will learn. And then you will teach us.>

Dalthwyn could only nod as he remembered the wars that had been fought over the Cruinni Stone, over hints and rumours of secrets left behind by the Precursors. The Precursors he had never believed in before. What he could find here!

<Teach me – hear voices,> Dalthwyn motioned at the books. <Teach me.>

Dalthwyn dreamed of wealth beyond what he'd dreamed of before.

<Teach me.>

THE VENUSIANS HAD ALREADY created quarters for Dalthwyn in their library, as though they wanted him there, and wanted him to learn. Dalthwyn had no complaints – he wanted to learn too. Already some of the things he'd found made him drool with what he could get paid for them. There was nothing earth shattering, but there were lost fragmentary histories, medical and healing methodologies, things that the right people would pay almost anything for. Dalthwyn kept note of what books were most valuable so that he could take them if he had a sudden need to depart.

As one possessed, he forced himself to learn the Venusian script, and to master their language. He would stay at the books, which were thick plates of a dense ivory or wood with a fine script engraved upon them, until his eyes were blinking shut, struggling to master the meaning of the

faint script. Once or twice a day he would slip into the water, slow and clumsy compared to the Venusians, graze at the fast growing green weed that lined the bottom, and relieve himself. He also ate from the gourds the Venusians brought.

The only scent was that of the Venusians, a cold sweetness with a hint of fish that varied slightly from individual to individual. He never smelled food, or anything else. The books only smelled of those who used them. And there were others who used the library, though not many. They were all old; Dalthwyn barely looked at them. They avoided him. Each day was filled with the soft rustle of feet, the faint scrape of claws, the quiet squees and clicks of whispered conversations.

Time passed, and the short times he spent outside grazing grew shorter and shorter as the light faded, and the weed grew more and more sparse.

One day the elder who had led him to the library came to speak with him.

<Dalckwee, I see that you have learned much.>

<Yes, mistress,> Dalthwyn answered with a faked modesty and respect. It seemed that like all other known sentients, the Venusians had two sexes. The male was small and did the hunting and gathering, the female was larger and dominant. Dalthwyn could have sworn he'd seen a third sex, but never clearly enough to be sure.

<The sun is about to set, and we will enter hibernation.>

Dalthwyn swallowed, suddenly nervous. Would he have to sleep the night away?

<We could modify you, but not that much. You can wipe that panic from your muzzle.>

He licked his lips. <Thank you, mistress.>

<You have wondered why we saved you?>

That made Dalthwyn take a step back, and he could feel the echoes of his non-existent ears flick in consternation, and he could feel the miasma of fear oozing from around him. After all this time he still knew so little about the Venusians. Did they have a sense of smell? He swallowed as cud threatened to ooze up. <I had.>

<The hunters who found you brought you back to our home. It was obvious to them that you were sentient, and they could not abandon you to die. We put you into a deep sleep, and then debated what to do with you.>

Dalthwyn slowly moved his hand to the blaster at his belt. <What did you decide?>

She clicked in laughter. <Obviously we decided to save you.>

He nodded.

<There is some contact amongst the tribes, and we have heard stories from the far north where others like you have come. We have heard of the Patrol—>

Dalthwyn's blaster was in his hand and pointed at her head.

Her eyes blinked, and she looked down at the steady barrel.

That was when Dalthwyn realized that the dome was empty—there was nobody else here but the two of them.

<From your reaction I presume that you are not friends with this Patrol.>

Dalthwyn nodded. <We have had our differences.>

<Then I suggest you let me continue. Although we may look like primitives, we aren't. You would do well to remember that.>

<What I'm holding, mistress, is a weapon, something far beyond anything you have.>

<We know. Its operation is simple, and we examined it after you demonstrated that it was a weapon. Later, when you slept, we swapped its heart.>

<I think it's best I leave now then. You've been helpful so I'm not going to just shoot you, but I would suggest you don't make any sudden moves.>

<Dalckwee, contrary to the belief of both you, and those of your kind in the north, we are not barbarians. When the Makers destroyed themselves, we kept secrets hidden. We remember. The north, where they settled, was devastated. But we near the equator remember.> She slowly moved her hand to a pouch and slowly pulled out a power pack.

Dalthwyn watched as she tossed it on the floor between them. It clattered and rolled to a stop against his right hoof.

<Your weapon does not function.>

<We'll see.> Dalthwyn flicked the charge to minimum and fired at the floor just in front of the Venusian. Nothing happened.

<We are not stupid.>

He backed away, and flicked his blaster so that he could check the power pack in its handle. It looked clean and showed eighty-three percent. He flicked the lock on the power pack and watched it pop out. It looked fine. He yanked it the rest of the way out.

Normally it should feel cool and metallic; now it felt warm. Although the end felt exactly right, the rest of it felt slightly rougher. Digging a finger-hooflet into it, he pulled away a sliver of some kind of blackish wood.

<Dalckwee, you have your technics based on metal and fire, we have ours based on growth and healing. The heart you have is fake, all the ones

you have are. And the one I brought is empty. We are not primitives for you to dominate.>

Dalthwyn let the useless blaster fall from his hands and clatter on the floor. <What are you going to do with me then?>

<You can try and survive in the night with only your body and your skills. You won't do it. We sleep during the night both to preserve food, and for safety. The beasts that are awakening now would treat you as a bountiful feast and gorge themselves on your flesh. But, if you want to leave, we won't stop you.>

Dalthwyn really needed time to think, but he couldn't let her keep the upper hand. If he could find where they'd hidden the packs—

<Dalckwee, you won't be able to see where you're going. It's night.>

He snorted. He'd been on Terra, in the parks at night. It had been easy to see by the bright glow of the—

Of the moon. Of which Venus had none.

Leaning down, he picked up his useless blaster and slipped it back into its holster. Even though he knew it was useless, it gave him confidence.

<Why didn't you just kill me then?>

<We need you. We need your help.>

Dalthwyn blinked.

<The northern tribes, those we consider primitive, have been overwhelmed by your technic civilization. The diseases your kind brought took out their brightest, and the rest now flock to join them, forgetting their past. The diseases hurt us too, but we found cures. We refuse to lose our culture, our history.>

<I may have brought diseases. If so, I'm sorry.>

<We had learned. The hunters sickened, but we a *clicktweet* had warned us and we had aid ready. We know that what you brought was not intentional. There are far easier and more effective ways you could deliver plague to us.>

<Did you need me to create cures?>

<No. We need the way you think.>

Dalthwyn blinked.

<Your technic culture is grasping, greedy, aggressive. Even without disease, even if we were unified, it would overwhelm us. We need your drive.>

<Why should I help you?>

<Because if you don't, we will die.>

<Bad argument. What's in it for me?>

<We have a plan. It may work, but it needs your help to ensure it works.



If you help, you will be honoured amongst us. If you refuse, then you can go home. No one will stop you.>

<You said it was a death sentence if I left.>

<If you leave at night.>

<But—>

<I will take you to where our histories are, to where the records we have of what happened to the northern tribes are. Read them overnight. When we awaken we will talk. If you still wish to go home, we will return your batteries and give you supplies and aid. We need your willing aid to make the plan succeed.>

He snorted. <You've set me up very well.>

<I'm sorry. We... I am not good at this. It is against the *clikue*. But, we are growing desperate. What we have done on our own is not promising.>

Dalthwyn licked his lips and snorted. <Guess I'm going to read then.>

<Dalckwee, we are not a cruel people. You must know that by now. What we are is desperate. Consider the time you spend here payment for healing. Food will be stockpiled here for you before we sleep. Your breath will keep the dome alight and refreshing the air for you. We hope you don't try and leave - you could kill many of us, and then you would die. For nothing.>

For the first time Dalthwyn wished he knew some choice words in Venusian, or even an alternate form of address. He had to use the language he knew. <Mistress, you have my word that I will study. I have nothing to lose, and much to gain.>

She clicked in what Dalthwyn had learned was amusement. <Oh yes, we know of what you've been studying. You can take it, take all that you can carry. We'll even help you pack.> She sighed. <Our knowledge is not going to save us, and our culture will doom us unless you help.>

ON TERRA IT WOULD BE WINTER. On Mars the centaurs would have migrated to the opposite hemisphere. In the asteroid colonies things would be unchanging as they always were.

On Venus it was just quiet.

Dalthwyn hadn't realized how much he missed comforting sounds and smells. Onboard ship there was always the hum of circulation fans, the creak of heat expanding and shrinking as the ship rotated to spread the heat of the sun around. On the asteroids there were always voices, the dim song of birds.

On Venus there was nothing.

Even when Dalthwyn slipped into the water to do his business, the clicks

and rattles and whistles that had always been there were gone. There were groans, loud mournful howls, but nothing else. The water seemed cooler; the only light was the dim wavery light that shone from the library into the still water. Even the plants he'd grazed upon were dead – the bottom was covered in decay and muck. He never spent long out there as he could sense things moving beyond the light, avoiding it as though they were afraid. Dalthwyn didn't want to find out what they were.

One time Dalthwyn stopped just below the entrance and looked up at himself. He'd been under for a while, stretching his muscles, and the water in the entrance had quieted to a glassy sheen. He still looked the same – his fur was the same colour, his face the same face, his muzzle the same muzzle. But both ears were gone, and that made him look alien. His fur had a sheen to it, and his eyes bulged out a little and glowed as though they had their own internal light. His hands were still black, as was the webbing between them. His legs may have been a bit longer, it was hard to be sure. It might have been an optical illusion caused by the fins that projected out to each side of his body, like the control fins of an atmospheric flyer. It was his hooves that looked out of place, hanging in the water, black and useless.

He scratched his nose, and a few bubbles slid out and glurped up to the pool where they sat there, clinging to the surface where he belonged. Then, in the distance, something groaned, and Dalthwyn burst back into the air and the light, water sliding from his fur. This was his world, not the water.

And in that world that currently imprisoned him, were the records.

Dalthwyn had known that the first landing on Venus had occurred some seventy years ago. Drugs found in the plants had caused a colony to rapidly grow at each of the poles – the rest of the planet was too hot and too wild. After the landings, it hadn't taken long for diseases, mild in mammalian races, to cross the racial divide and burst upon the Venusians. The Patrol had tried to help, but it was estimated that half the native population had died before effective inoculations were developed and distributed. That was where his knowledge ended.

The Venusian records were more detailed.

The polar tribes had always been on the fringes of Venusian civilization, they were the scattered barbarians. The closer one got to the equator, the more developed Venusian civilization had been. At the time of the landing at the north pole, most of the planet had been divided between a number of large federations of citystates. The Venusians had never really known war – the barbarians were out of civilization more by choice than

anything else. There was some conflict, but weapons had never really been developed beyond spears. There was not even economic competition as was known on Terra. Certainly there was competition for prestige – certain federations were better than the others at certain things. But there was no ownership. Other than clusters of learning, universities, such as what he was in, there was no permanent habitation. Buildings were destroyed when no longer needed, and left no evidence of their ever having existed by night. To the technic civilization of which Dalthwyn was a member, the Venusians looked like a primitive rabble of wandering tribes, without permanent settlement, without any knowledge or technology.

But they did have knowledge. Just not technology as the Patrol would understand the term. Their knowledge was biological. Whereas the world Dalthwyn knew made their buildings out of stone and wood, the Venusians grew their buildings from a wood-like fungus they had bred for millennia; whereas the United Planets made their tools out of metal and grease and the breaking of the atom, forcing their will upon the physical reality, the Venusians used chemicals and biological agents, retroviruses and symbiotes, to change and mutate the life around them, changing it until it fit their will and did what they needed.

It's what they'd done to him. They'd used tools millennia old, possibly dating from the Precursors, to change him, to make him fit.

To save him.

This Venusian culture had survived, unchanging, living with its world, learning and growing in its understanding, for untold ages. Possibly for as long as the fifty thousand years since the Precursors were said to have destroyed themselves. If they had ever actually existed.

The Venusians at the poles transmitted the diseases to the rest of the planetary population. But, whereas the polar tribes got the eventual inoculation, the rest of the planet didn't. And it was more densely populated.

Within five years, something like seventy percent of the planetary population was dead. And that dying had ended the federations, had ended the city states, had ended the universities. The group that had found him was one of the university centres. They'd co-operated with the communities around them, isolated travel and minimized the spread of the plagues, and had finally developed inoculations against them.

There was one account, a personal account it seemed, that stayed in his mind and haunted his dreams. A Venusian, female, had come back to her village, only to find the lake empty, and full of the stench of rot. The water was black and oily, and when she'd dove into it, it had clasped at her skin, itching, grabbing, not wanting to let go. When she reached the bottom,

she found that most of the houses were gone, rotted and sunk to the bottom. Scattered amongst them were the bodies of her clan, of her friends, of her family. They had not died easy; it seemed that they had entered a delirium before death. With their claws they'd scratched at themselves, ripped pustules from their flesh, ripped their skin and muscle until bone showed. Even the other life in the lake abandoned them, refused to eat the bodies, leaving them to slowly rot, their flesh decaying and melting into the bottom muck. Even the weeds refused to grow around the corpses.

What had happened to the rest of the planet was not known, only speculated about. Explorers had found only barbarism and suspicion. Travelers to the north or south had encountered Venusians that chopped down the trees, killed the wildlife, and were equipped with devices of metal and plastic. Devices like his own. They'd abandoned the Venusian culture, copied that of their conquerors, and were enforcing it on the rest of the planet.

The biologists here had developed a new warrior caste, all male, all sterile. They were strong and tough. One on one they could beat the northerners.

Except they had no weapons, and no clue as to how to use them.

Consensus had been reached to try and negotiate with one of the invaders the Venusians had heard rumours of, stories passed and distorted during the plague years. They needed information and they needed help. They'd hoped that if they could find one, they could convince him to help them. Where Dalthwyn would have sent parties to kidnap one, the Venusians couldn't conceive of such an act. Instead they had waited, trying to find one and ask them to come, hope fading, until they'd found him.

For the rest of the night Dalthwyn read, ate and slept, and thought. He had to decide. He could take the knowledge, steal it, even though it was freely offered. Then he could return north, let it out, milk it for all the money he could.

But, eventually, the Patrol would find out, and they would take control of the knowledge for the benefit of civilization. Just as they were destroying the Venusians for the benefit of civilization. Sure, he'd be left with his wealth, his does, his own asteroid. A fat technocrat wasting away in a life of sex and play as civilization continued on around him, unchanging. Under the yoke of the Patrol.

THE FIRST DALTHWYN KNEW OF SPRING was the sudden silence in the lake when he dove into it. The water was still black and murky, but the groans and whines that had haunted him were gone. He didn't make much of it at first, more relieved than anything else. The water began to lighten,

changing from black to a murky blue, to a dark green. In the dim pre-dawn light he could see the black mud of the bottom carpeted in the corpses of the bottom weed. Here and there were lumps of the Venusians buried in the muck as they hibernated. The light grew brighter, bright green weed began to grow, algae began to drift through the water, lilies bloomed on the surface. Where once Dalthwyn would have eagerly ripped into the new growth, now he just nibbled, enjoying it as a treat, but letting the mass alone to grow. The sky brightened, the water lightened, and the Venusians stirred into wakefulness.

Dalthwyn was reading some old biological records, suggestions that the body could be changed, cells could be regenerated, but at the cost of one's memories, when he heard the water slosh downstairs, and a body thump onto the floor. He climbed down the ladder awkwardly, his hooves almost useless except for the gap between the two lobes on each foot. With a clomp he dropped the last few metres, and then turned to see the dripping form of the elder who'd taught him, who'd talked to him, before she left to sleep.

<Dalckwee, I see that you did not try to escape.>

Dalthwyn snorted. <As you pointed out, it would have been futile. Did you rest well?>

She clucked sadly. <As well as might be expected. I fear I will not awaken from tonight's sleep.>

<I will be saddened by your passing.>

Her eyes glowed. <So, you will stay?>

<You have no idea the wealth I could make if I took what you offer back.>

Dalthwyn hadn't even realized he'd decided, until he said that.

For a moment she closed her eyes, the semi-transparent eyelids not completely hiding the sad yellow glow. <That is your choice, and, yes, we will keep our word. All I, we, ask, is for you to send somebody back who will help us.>

<I doubt that anybody will come.>

<Then we will die, forgotten. It is natural that the better competitor wins.... I— It seems that we are not the better—>

<Mistress—> Dalthwyn tried to wrap his muzzle around the clicks and squeaks of her name and failed. <I never said I would not help.> He could see other forms swimming down in the water, waiting, but none made a move to enter the dome.

<I do not understand.>

<For a long time I had planned to leave, but I realized that going home would give me nothing. I've been....> There was no word for rich. <Blessed.

I've been wretched. I have no love for the civilization I come from. I want....>  
He did now know the word for revenge either, if there were one. <My culture survives, but I hate the price it has had to pay. Together, maybe, we can find a different way.>

She just nodded as Venusians didn't smile. <You will help us?>

<I will help you. But there will have to be changes. Your culture will change. Do you understand this?>

<We understand. We have talked much, made plans. We know that we will need—> Her voice forced out a distorted but recognizable, <Technology. We have found some metal. But we need to know more. We need to know how to think.>

Dalthwyn nodded. <Your culture will change. Things will not be as they were.>

<We know. Yet, we would choose our change, choose what to keep, what to throw away. We would not have the choice forced upon us from outside.>

<Then let us talk and plan. Bring the other elders. Show me the new caste you have bred. Tell me what you have found. You won't be able to make anything like this blaster,> he pointed, <but there are others. I can only try to remember.>

<There are techniques we know that might help you remember.>

<They will be needed.>

<Then let us share.> She slapped her tail into the water, and other forms started bursting out, all old and wise. <Let us share together.>

And then Dalthwyn and the elders sat, and talked, and planned.

WHEN SENTIENTS FROM TERRA first landed on Venus, they thought they knew what Venus was. Pictures taken from orbit had revealed only mist-shrouded wilderness, no sign of civilization. The polar landings had found primitives with only a basic culture. The disease that had swept them was unfortunate, but it had swept away their primitive beliefs and allowed them to accept civilization.

Or so the members of the United Planets centered on Terra believed.

Policy was made to limit colonization, to give the Venusians time to adapt, to help them change their world and bring it into the modern technic sphere. There was nothing on Venus that was not more cheaply attained from the asteroids, except some refined drugs that the natives brought and traded.

It was over a hundred years after the first landing when this belief, so obvious and logical, was proven wrong. Like Mars, Venus had its own

culture, old, foreign, alien from that of Terra and her outposts throughout the system.

It was the Venusians that made contact. They'd been studying the foreign invaders of their world, determining whether or not they were wise enough to have contact made with. Envoys came, dressed and cloaked according to the customs of Terra that they had learned through unknown means.

The Venusians finally revealed their true selves, and kept their planet.

And when they came, they whispered amongst themselves what was at first thought to be their name for the Great Maker: *Dalckwee*.





*The Metamor Keep story universe was first created back in 1997 and has been active ever since. It is a fantasy setting in which a curse was placed on a castle and its lands that transforms anybody who stays there for more than a week or two into an anthropomorphic animal, the other gender, or a child. Over time, the first of these three transformations has proven the most popular to writers, but in the three tales you are about to read, Michael has created a character from a species that nobody had ever considered, and he's truly asked the question what it might make life like. And he's done so with a big sense of humour.*

*Michael's contributions to Metamor have been incalculable. His insistence on things making sense and being consistent helped hammer down many things about life at Metamor that were too often taken for granted. To name just a few, he helped establish the value of coin, forced everyone to consider what Keptowne and Euper – the principal towns nearest to the castle – actually looked like, taught the rest of us what the economy and everyday features of medieval life, and also, how much it took to equip an army and maintain it. Metamor Keep would be decidedly less if not for Michael.*

*Though he did write a serious story arc – “Raider of the Lost Cult,” featuring a mercenary turned into a unicorn who purified away all alcohol content everytime she tried to get a drink, much to her consternation – it is sadly too long to include in its entirety here. It can be found on the Metamor Keep archive at [metamorkeep.com](http://metamorkeep.com) and deserves to be read. But he did write some side stories featuring a “walk on” character who he couldn't let just walk off.*

*~ Jason Gillespie*

## METAMOR KEEP: A DAY OR TWO IN THE LIFE

SEPTEMBER, 707 CR

Roger, the giant snail gardener, twisted an eyestalk and glared. The thing was still there. It nagged him! All the week it'd taken him to work the length of this section of the garden, it nagged him! One little weed, a dandelion it looked like, growing out of a crack in the bottom of a walkway arch.

It tasked him! And he would have it!

With that, he put his hoe back into its rack on his shell, and began a slow movement towards the offending weed.

The sun rose. The garden warmed. Dew glistened. The weed got closer.

A bunch of children ran into the garden. "You there! Careful of the—" Roger winced as they trampled through a bed of daisies. Damn children! Never watching where they're going! Pulling out the hoe, he shook it at them. "You just wait! I'll catch you and then—"

The children laughed and fled, their final act being to throw a straw-stuffed ball that bounced off of Roger's shell. He thought about spending an hour going back to pick it up, but the weed was more important. And, he was going to take care of that damn weed if it killed him!

That night he slept, almost below the arch, curling up in his shell where it was nice and warm. Dreams filled his head, dreams of tomorrow when he would deal with the damn weed once and for all!

Waking up, he took a long gulp from the canteen on his shell. Almost empty—hopefully the supply run would meet him today. He hated living off of dew. Behind him his trail glistened in the dawn sunlight. Some rain would be nice as the gardens could really use it.

Crawling up and onto the pebbled walkway, the individual stones scratching against his foot, he cleaned up the edging as he crawled by. He hated going on stone—a few feet were fine, but after a while, the tickling just became annoying. And it would be a largely wasted day today too, as he'd be out of range of any of the thousand other maintenance tasks that needed doing.

It was halfway to noon by the time he reached the fieldstone wall and started crawling up it. Fieldstone was much more comfortable—smoother, kind of a silky top. He didn't mind it, though grass was still better. At least it wasn't like the time he had to go into the rosebushes. He shuddered, eyestalks jerking back and forth. Better not think of that.

The sun had made the stone pleasantly warm by the time it was vertical in the sky. He tasted the air; yes, winter was definitely on the way. Not for a few months yet, but he'd better start heading back for home now. He hated being stuck in hibernation through the winter. His shell was *still* bruised from the assault last winter when he'd been used as a bowling ball to break up some lutin formations. Or so they'd told him later when he'd awoken with a splitting headache.

Half way up now and the weed was almost within reach. He could see it, taunting him, ridiculing him, messing up *his* nice gardens.

Ironshod boots clattered on the stone below, and something inhuman and lutin-like growled, turning at bay. How had *it* gotten loose inside the

keep? Roger just prayed that the curse wasn't mutating as he had *enough* trouble keeping the rose subspecies properly cross pollinated.

Almost at the weed now. Almost— More voices, and Roger watched through one eye stalk as a giant foxtaur bounded into the archway, horrid axe swinging. The lutin had time for half a scream before his head was cloven off, and that damned Misha starting hacking off the ear for a trophy.

"Who's going to clean up that blood? You're the one who spilled it!"

"You all right?" Misha asked.

Roger grumbled and turned away, glaring at the hateful weed. So close. He turned back to Misha, and waved his hoe. "You just clean that up, you hear!"

Misha snorted, finished his grisly work, and dragged the lutin corpse off.

Youth these days. Not so much as a thank you! Hmph!

And... ah-hah! He'd made it! *Take that, you damn weed, you! Thought you could get away from me, did you?*

With that, Roger pulled out a short shovel and dug the weed out of the crack it was growing in, making sure to get all the root. Last thing he needed was for the damn thing to grow back.

Holding the battered weed up, or was that down since he was now almost at the top of the arch, Roger turned his eyestalks towards the setting sun. "Victory!"

A few birds cawed in the distance.

Roger curled up to sleep. Tomorrow he'd get back down, pick up any scraps of bone or flesh that the pest Misha had left, and then he'd go back and get that ball.

Damn kids—



## METAMOR KEEP: MUFFINS ON THE MOVE

OCTOBER, 707 CR

Roger was curled up in his shell trying to get some sleep – it *is* what you do at night after all – when something *slammed* into his shell at high speed. Scrolls rattled around inside, and he could feel his foot flailing at the ground before he felt himself tip over and *thump* onto his side on the grass.

*That* killed the last of the sleepiness clogging his eyestalks.

Grumbling, the giant snail gardener pushed himself out of his shell, felt around with his foot, and slowly pulled himself upright, happy again to be standing on something.

What happened?

He looked around in all directions with his eyestalks until one found a full form cheetah out cold on the ground beside him, and another found a crack, a *crack* in his shell!

“What the— Ow. *Ow!* Can’t a guy sleep in peace? And it *hurts*. *Ow!*” With one hand he gingerly touched the hairline crack in his precious shell. “Ow!”

The cheetah groaned.

“Bloody—” Roger slowly pulled himself around so the horrific crack was safely hidden and examined the quietly moaning cheetah. He was wearing a harness – and a badge. Guess he was one of the keep’s... umm... couriers—

There was something in the air. Not that Roger was really smelling it, there was something tickling his feelers – something – *mmm!* With his hands he felt around the pouch on the cheetah’s back and felt something soft and squishy. He pulled it out.

A muffin! Roger hadn't had a muffin for months! *Omomom!*  
 He grabbed a second. *Omomom*—  
 Holding a half eaten one in one hand, he reached—  
 Then the damn cheetah blinked its eyes open. "Rrrrr—?"  
 Hiding the occupied hand behind him, Roger burst out, "What the hell were you thinking? Don't you look where you're *going*?" He wiped a last few crumbs from his lips with his feelers. "You could have killed me! In fact, I'm in pain right now. *Ow!* Pain, I tell you! *I need a doctor!*"  
 The cheetah shifted, becoming an anthro form. "But—" He shook his head. "I have an important muffin delivery—"  
 "Important? What's more important: some horrible muffins, or *my life*? Get Coe here *right now!* I'll die if you don't! *Ow!* And hurry! *Hurry!* It hurts *so much!* *Ow! Ow!*"  
 "But—"   
 "Do you want my *death* on your conscience?"  
 "It's an important muffin delivery—"  
 "I'll die! *Die*, you hear me? *Die!* You're my only hope. *Ow!* The pain! *The pain!*"  
 "But—"   
 "Go! Save me! *Save me!*"  
 The cheetah got up and fled back towards the keep as Roger moaned. When the courier was out of sight he *omomom'd* the rest of the muffin.

THE SUN WAS WARM ON HIS SHELL by the time the raccoon Coe came waddling over. The cheetah wasn't with him; must have run off with his muffin delivery. Roger grumbled about wasted time and blind couriers as Brian Coe examined him. The snail made sure to moan at opportune moments.

"Roger, it's just a hairline fracture."  
 "But it hurts!"  
 "Don't give me that! Just rub some excretion over it for a few days and it'll heal. Not that kind! You know what I mean!"  
 "Oh, fine—"  
 "And one more thing, Roger—"  
 "What?"  
 "If you're going to steal Misha's muffins, don't do it when your skin's transparent."  
 Roger started looking for places to hide as Coe walked off.

## METAMOR KEEP: KEEPER OF SECRETS

NOVEMBER, 707 CR

It was a dark moonless night. Roger was having trouble sleeping in the cold night. The *cold* night. It was going to be tight whether or not he made it in the door by winter. Very *very* tight. Well, he'd hibernated before, and as long as the kids didn't built a giant snow fort around him that didn't melt until June, it wouldn't be a problem.

Damn kids!

"Klaatu barado!"

One eyestalk poked up and blinked as the other reacted similarly, looking in the other direction. Was it that time already?

"Klaatu barado!"

"Nikto!" Roger called back.

There was a shuffle in the bushes and a black-cloaked skunk pushed his way out. "Hail, brother!"

"Hail!"

"We have the next hundred digits ready, brother! Are you prepared?"

"I am ready brother."

"May the Irrational Transcendental bless us all! All hail the word of Pythagoras brought to us by the fox!"

"All hail the mighty Pythagoras!"

With that, the skunk handed over a tightly rolled piece of parchment. Turning, cloak billowing, he fled back into the darkness.

Roger unrolled the parchment and held it up, looking at its black surface. The numbers were there. More in the endless series of the— He refused

to even think it! A number too holy and too secret to ever be spoken. To ever even *whisper of* to outsiders.

Rolling the parchment up, he pulled himself into his shell, and pushed it back into the almost complete compartment. In a few days he would seal it off, his shell growing that much larger.

And the mysteries of Irrational Transcendentalism would be safe forever!

All hail the mysterious power of the square root of two!



## FRIENDSHIP

*SIGH – WOOFFLE – SIGH – WOOFFLE....*

It was late in the lunar day, and Alexander was in a never before visited place on the edge of the Oceanus Procellarum. His helmet was clear, and the stars shone bright overhead. The only sounds were the *clink-clink* of the hammer, the muffled in and out hiss of his breath, and the amplified breathing of Comet in his headphones.

*Sigh – wooffle – sigh – wooffle....*

Alexander knew he was breathing. And he could feel each impact of the hammer. But, the breathing of Comet was what told him he was not alone.

*Sigh – wooffle – sigh – wooffle....*

A thing very important in the vast emptiness of Earth's moon. A thing that Alexander needed to keep himself sane.

*Sigh – wooffle – sigh – wooffle....*

And, after almost a decade, a reassurance that his best friend, his companion, his blessing in loneliness, his confidant, was alive.

*Sigh – wooff—*

It took almost two heartbeats for Alexander to recognize the absence. Abandoning the hammer, he spun himself around, pushing a gloved hand against the ancient shard of lunar granite. Then he bound and leapt towards the hopper. He ran, the twin lights on his helmet casting jagged ovals of illumination on the dusty ground, and then on the battered 'hopper.

The 'hopper was all the pair needed. A distant descendant of the original Apollo rover, it was almost as small. The inside was crowded, packed with supplies and equipment. In the nose the narrow seats were stark through

the transparent carbon, and way too small for sleeping. A panel had been pulled from the side and a transparent bubble extruded to provide more room. A tent of sorts, on a platform above the ground for insulation, and buoyed out by the pressure of the air within.

This one was not inflated.

The flexible plastic, as tough as thin steel, billowed like a thick bowl of gel in a howling wind. Comet was tangled inside, blinking awake. His uplifted canine form stared through the collapsing bubble. Blood boiled from his muzzle, his eyes stared, his mouth wide open to the vacuum, trying to speak.

Something had popped the bubble. But what? Alexander's light flashed across a jagged hole in the metal floor, likely matching one in the bubble. A freak micrometeorite? It didn't matter.

Comet stopped struggling, slumping in the feather gravity. Blood was bubbling out his mouth.

Tear away the offending plastic? Wouldn't work – he was nowhere near strong enough. Five more steps took him to the 'hopper's door. Breaking open the emergency panel, he yanked the lever spilling the air from inside. The pressure light turned from green to red, and he unlatched and yanked open the armoured door. A last few wisps of air pressed against him, escaping into the vastness as he crawled in. He left the door open. Not that closing it would do any good, given the hole in the tent. He grabbed Comet's suit from its rack and dragged it down the passageway. Yanking open the hatch to the tent, he pulled the suit through. The plastic fell around him, billowing like something alive as it tried to hold its shape with nothing but vacuum inside. Reaching Comet, he couldn't tell if his companion was alive or dead through his gauntlets. All he did, all he could do, was open the clamshell of the canine's suit and shove the uplifted dog in. Not worrying about threading the tail into its slot, he shoved the other limbs in as best he could before ramming the suit closed. He only did a couple latches before reaching over and slamming shut the helmet. The suit stiffened as air flooded in, and Alexander pressed buttons and controls to make it pure oxygen, staring at health monitors.

They flicked, and remained red.

Slamming the other suit latches closed, he whispered: "Breathe, damn you, breathe!"

Overriding the safeties he shoved the pressure upward. One atmosphere, two—

A few telltales flickered to yellow. Heartbeat. But no breathing.

Three atmospheres, four. The suit material ballooned out, becoming hard as an aluminum drum.

“Please breathe—”

Five atmospheres. More flickered to yellow. Respiration!

Alexander locked the controls and prayed. Five atmospheres of pure oxygen was way into the toxicity range. Did it matter? He switched his radio to Comet’s frequency and turned the volume up all the way. And listened.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“Thank you – thank you!”

No sign of any toxicity reaction. How much oxygen was getting into Comet’s blood? The vacuum had mauled his lungs, but something was left. Thank God!

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

The blood oxygen light steadied yellow. It wasn’t a good reading – the monitor wasn’t pinned to the ear – but it was a reading.

Alexander was tempted to push the pressure to five and a half but – yellow was enough, barely. He pulled his hand away.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

He’d bought some time, not much, but some. Comet needed a major medical facility - nothing he had on hand would help. Hell, nothing any independent had would.

Don’t panic. Calm. One thing at a time.

The ’hopper needed to move. And that meant the tent had to be pulled in. One step at a time.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Dragging Comet in through the tent hatch, he locked it closed. Beside it he entered the code to dump the tent and platform – there wasn’t time to properly put it away. Pulling Comet with him, he backed into the cockpit.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Thanking the lunar gravity, he pulled the dog’s limp form over and strapped him into the co-pilot seat. He strapped himself in the other where, flipping a few switches, he backed the ’hopper out. It shuddered as it whined over the rough lunar surface, its huge balloon wheels jerking and shifting and sliding in the soft dust. One hand slammed the cockpit hatch shut.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Pulling another toggle, he dumped all the water except that needed to

balance the vehicle. The extra mass would hurt more. After, a faint gurgle-thump echoed through his suit as the computer balanced the 'hopper's mass.

Out of the valley, he jumped the 'hopper half around. Air gusted out lifting the tiny vehicle off the ground and spinning it. With a jerk, a thump, and a bounce, the 'hopper landed, and Alexander gunned it forward, out of the widening valley.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Now what?

He activated the satellite uplink, and waited nearly a minute for the handshaking to complete and the Foote Industries search screen come up.

"Major medical help – closest – current location – cost...." He swallowed. "Cost no object. Minimum requirements – full lung replacement."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

SEARCHING... flashed. Then a list of locations starting with Luna City, days away, at the top.

"Sort by distance."

The list flickered and changed. The closest was a tad under six hundred clicks. "Full info, first match."

HELIUM-3 REGOLITH MINING FACTORY

REGISTERED TO ANDERSON-BABBAGE

More information was listed, but Alexander ignored it. A factory was almost a mobile town, slowly crawling across the lunar surface. It would have what was needed. It had to.

And it wouldn't be cheap.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Alexander didn't care.

"Open link to the factory, emergency priority."

Static crackled in his ears for a moment before the computer filtered it out. Seconds passed. A female voice spoke: "This is Anderson-Babbage Mining Factory Heinlein. I read you. How can we—"

"This is Alexander Hasanth, UC 893416-33A5, declaring alpha medical emergency. An uplifted free canine, type -doberman, class three beta, UC 9956-55B, suffered vacuum exposure. He is currently sealed in a five atmosphere pure oxygen environment, breathing is rough. Additional eye damage likely. Can you assist?"

She snorted disdainfully over the link. "Hasanth, records show a canine slave registered to you."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“What? A—” He’d always meant to free Comet, but he’d never gotten around to it. Non-free uplifts had different medical rights – and now he got a fucking lawyer. “Jesus Christ! Fine! I, Alexander Hasanth, of my own free will, manumit the— the uplifted canine type doberman, class three beta, UC 9956-55B, currently in my possession. Log this now!”

“Information transmitted to Luna City. It’ll take a day—”

“Fuck, lady, it’s logged!” He paused, and then almost whispered, “Just— Save him... please—”

“Fine.” She paused. “You do know what this’ll cost? And for a pet?”

“He’s not a pet! He never has been! Just – please – save him. Cost is no object, not for him!”

“I—” A pause, a long one. Just as he was about to yell, the voice continued, “Alexander Hasanth, records show— show you have a freed canine assistant. Support facilities are available and lungs can be grown on board.” She sighed. “This is going to cost. Are you sure?”

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“I don’t care! You got my code, you can check my balance.” Please, please Lord, let it be enough. Please—

“I— It isn’t—”

“Please—”

“I—” The tapping of keys came faintly over the link. “Alexander Hasanth – a recent deposit shows your balance will— will be sufficient.”

“Thank you! Thank you!”

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“I am sending you our exact location. Our shuttle is in transit to Luna City – how long until you can reach us?”

“Your shuttle?” One thing at a time. One thing. He ran some calculations through his head. Ballpark figures – maybe – safe and slow, or risky and fast?

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“Sorry, Anderson-Babbage. ETA twenty minutes, rough. Will hotwire the ‘hopper and make it in one leap. Only way.”

“You sure?”

“I won’t let Comet die.”

“Comet?”

“I was a lot younger when I got him.”

He pushed the panic button. His little vehicle made a brief hop, dumping everything possible in flight with a loud *clunk-rattle*. Onboard were left only passengers, air and a minimum ballast. The landing bang was lighter this time.

Alexander spoke: “Anderson-Babbage, I’ll be coming in hard. Will try for a klick from your location, more precise details momentarily. Please have recovery team standing by—”

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“I’m counting on you.”

“I— Acknowledged, Alexander. Recovery team will be sent. Be warned that if you come closer than five hundred metres, we will have no choice but treat you as hostile and destroy you for our own safety.”

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

“I— Understood. And... thank you. Please monitor this channel – will send automatic location updates.”

“Understood. Good luck.”

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Alexander spent nearly five minutes running options through the onboard comp. It would be tight. Very tight. But with everything... estimated landing would be thirty-seven hundred metres north-northwest. Touch down would be hard, but what were a few broken bones?

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Sucking some water from the tank in his suit, he locked in the program and sent the update to the factory ship.

“Initiate,” he told the computer.

Like a ship fleeing a flare, the ’hopper leapt off the ground. Almost all the onboard oxygen was dumped in one long *woosh* of liquid to gas to propellant. The cockpit was vacuum, but sound echoed through the aluminum of the craft. All around Alexander were creaks and groans. Something pinged, and he winced. A groan, a *snap*, and a light flashed red.

And then silence.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

He pulled up a diagnostic – a feed to the main tank had ruptured. Gas was whooshing out, spinning the ’hopper. Alexander reacted by instinct and pushed the eject button. A clang, a clatter, and silence. A quick burst of gas from the side stopped the spin.

The main tank was gone, but the emergency reservoir was still sealed. Their in-suit tanks would keep them alive; the reservoir was for the vehicle. But—

In his soul he knew it wouldn’t be enough for the landing.

“Alexander, this is Anderson-Babbage. We track your course. You’re a bit off, estimate you’ll touch down about eighteen hundred metres from us. Rescue crews have been notified— we’re tracking a secondary object moving away from you. It’ll land close – can you ID?”

"Anderson-Babbage, I had to eject my main oxygen tank. A feed line ruptured."

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

He heard a swallow over the connection. "Will you have enough for landing?"

"I— I don't know."

"I don't know how we can assist—"

"You've done what you can. Keep the rescue team in position."

"Understood. Good luck."

"Thanks."

The reserve tank had... about half what had been planned for the landing. The rest? A check of his HUD showed he had almost an hour in suit. On pure oxygen, Comet had a bit less. Wait – he had an idea! There was a hope. A faint hope.

*Gurgle-rasp-bubble-gaaaasssp-wheeze....*

Alexander turned and looked at Comet. His eyes were still closed. Would he ever know? Did it matter? Reaching over he ran his gloved hand along his friend's chest. Then he blew explosive bolts dumping the canopy. Ignoring the protests from Anderson-Babbage about the new object, he plotted his options and set the program. The only program he could. Likely neither he nor Comet would survive the landing, but at least they had a chance. Alexander would make sure Comet's was far greater than his. And he had time to prepare things in case of his most likely death. "I hope you have a full life Comet," he whispered. "You deserve it." He could even hear Comet saying *don't worry about it* in his mind.

Locking the program, he set the computer to record, with orders to dump it to Anderson before impact. "I, Alexander Hassan, being of sound mind and body, do hereby give all my worldly possessions to the freed sentient known as Comet—"

COMET GASPED, EYES FLICKING OPEN. The last thing he remembered was waking up, unable to breathe. Now he felt sore, but breathing was so easy— "Master?" he called. He smelled a hospital, disinfectant, medicines, machines, blood. Another canine. His eyes focused – he could see the stranger, looking down. "Where's my master, Alexander?"

"Comet, my name is Williard. I was security for the recovery team—"

"Recovery?"

"You suffered severe vacuum damage, but Alexander got to you in time to keep you alive. He brought you to us barely in—"

"Where is he?"

“Alexander’s—he’s dead. There was damage to the ‘hopper. He did all he could for a soft landing, ejected you at the best possible angle just before impact. You had a mild concussion, a few broken bones. But—”

Comet reached up, grabbed Williard’s shirt. “What happened?”

“To... to optimize your chances, his ejection was less than optimal. He... didn’t survive.”

“Alexand—” His voice faded. Closing his eyes, he remembered. Then he howled, a long mournful cry. A howl of pain. A howl of sorrows. A howl of memories.

Williard joined him.



## STRESS TESTING THE TERMINAL VELOCITY OF A BUNNYTAUR

I LOOKED AT THE ICE NERVOUSLY. My body was still new and I knew what would happen.

“Chicken! Chiiickeen! Gilda’s a chicken! Gilda’s a chicken!”

My nostrils flared and my tail stood straight up as I glared at my tormentor. He was standing there on the ice, all covered in white fur with a disgustingly cute puffball tail. He was naked, from his four furred bunny feet up into his human torso up into his rabbit face from the top of which his two ears hung limply down his back. Well, naked except for the ice skates on his four feet and the pair of red furry gloves.

*I know you can stand up, Ianthe, my lifelong AI companion, whispered in my mind.*

As my suddenly hateful new ears shifted to pull Alex’s voice in clearer I screamed back at the machine, *What do you know! You’ve never had to walk!*

*Ianthe, it was just a cartoon. Back on old Earth during winter deer did not avoid ice.*

*And how do you know? Have you ever been there?*

*Of course not! I was born when you were—*

By now everybody was chanting it. Those who were currently human, the felines, a few morphic vulpines, and the one morphic kangaroo.... All wearing iceskates, all crowding in a semicircle on the ice in front of me, in front of Alex. Of course none of them were deer or even equine. I’d been human until recently, until I’d begged my parents to allow me my first bodychange for my twelfth birthday. And, of course, my birthday fell just

weeks before Christmas. So I had to learn to walk in snow and on ice and *not* be splay-legged Bambi.

*"Fine! I'll do it!"*

That outburst seemed to halt the chant, though Alex gently hopped in place, then landed and glided towards me on the blades of his four skates. With a sudden spasm of his whole body he hopped up and spun sideways. Then he landed and stopped, showering me with specks of ice. "Don't worry Gilda, Thumper'll catch you."

Shaking my head to clear off the ice I suddenly realized that they *all* knew why I'd chosen this form. But how?

*Ianthe! Did you chat about my reasons for this over the net?*

*I? Of course I didn't! How could you even think—*

*Then who?*

*Err.... Gilda, you know that you've never made a secret of it. Ever since you saw that movie....*

I sighed.

At that point Thump— err, Alex, twisted sideways and glided effortlessly across the ice first to my left, and then to my right. All the time he kept his torso turned so that he could watch me. "It's not hard, Gilda. Trust me!"

"She won't do it," I heard somebody whisper.

Forcing down the urge to bring up some cud, I gingerly lifted my right fore hoof and placed it on the ice. I could feel the pressure of the boot on my hoof, the tug of the straps that wrapped around my legs. I could hear the gentle creak of the wet pseudoleather straps stretch. And, of course, I could scent the bitterness of my own fear.

Well, the ice *seemed* safe enough, didn't it?

With that thought I pressed down with some of my weight....

...and instantly the skate shot forward, yanking my hoof out from under me. My other front leg twisted and before I knew it I was flat on my upper chest, facedown on the ice, the tip of my muzzle cold and wet and flaring with pain from its impact. Even the base of my antlers was sore as they'd hit first – the blow had almost ripped them out!

Yea, I know. Female deer aren't supposed to have antlers. Well I wanted antlers, so I got them. Deer-taurs don't exactly occur naturally either, now do they?

Everybody burst out laughing.

*I've found a beta wetware routine for four legged equine skating. I could download—*

*No! I'm doing this!*

How had I ever let Alex talk me into this? He'd told me we'd be alone, just the two of us. Why was everybody else here?

Blinking tears of frustration and fear and embarrassment from my eyes, I wriggled my way back onto the snow covered grass. I forced myself back up onto my four skates. Sniffing, I clenched my fists, untangled my long blue and white striped toque from the trailing ends of the long scarf around my neck, and then straightened it up.

I'd show them! *All* of them!

*Gilda, are you—*

I didn't respond to Ianthe; instead, I crouched down and then leapt on to the ice.

I'd show them. I'd show them all.

Gently I arced through the air in the one-sixth gee, although the ship's tenth of a gravity's worth of acceleration also pulled me towards the stern, and gracefully landed on the ice.

"See—"

At which point each of my legs moved in a different direction and I was gently falling sideways onto the ice, immersed in a cruel sea of laughter. Closing my eyes and choking back tears I waited for the impact....

...and instead was caught by something wearing soft white fur. He lifted me back onto my skates and held upright even though my legs kept sliding out from under me.

It was Alex. "Gilda.... If you wanted to leap, you should have become a bunny!"

What was it with Alex and bunnies? His whole family was like that. Monoformers. All bunny this and bunny that and....

...and a warm friend to hug and cuddle and talk and share.

I wanted to push him away, but I knew if I did I'd just fall down again.

So I let Alex hold me. After all, that made him the centre of attention. He always wanted to be the centre of attention. He'd always had to be as long as I'd known him, and I'd known him as long as I could remember. His family and mine had been friends even before either of us were born.

"Alex, I thought you said it'd just be the two of us."

He turned away trying to look sheepish. Instead, however, seemed more like a silly fluffy toy. "The gang just... well... came."

I snorted at that.

"I'm sorry, Gilda. I knew that if they weren't here you'd—"

"*What?*"

"I was afraid you'd just stay on the shore and watch. I knew I couldn't convince you to come out just by myself—"

*Ianthe. I want that wetware. Now.*

*No problem. We should run some simulat—*

*No! I want it downloaded and installed now!*

Shoving myself away from Alex I slid myself backwards, landing on my rump in the process.

*“How could you?”*

Of course the pending fight just caused the others to crowd closer around us. Alex must have loved it.

*“You lied to me!”*

*“Gilda, it was—”*

*“I don’t care! I don’t need you! I don’t need any of you! I—”*

*It’s downloaded and I’m activating it now.*

Then I knew what to do, how to stand. I knew what legs to move, in what order, and in what fashion....

...assuming the wetware actually worked. Ianthe had mentioned that it was beta, after all. But I needed it. I’d show *them*! I’d show them *all*!

With that I stood up, turned my back on Alex, and started skating.

I actually started skating!

It’s hard to describe exactly what I did, my legs moved in all directions and I always felt about to fall. But, whatever it was, it worked! Each hoof, or more properly the skate attached to each hoof, touched the ice in the proper sequence and soon I was moving and curving.

I was having fun! My toque blew in the breeze, its tail tangled up in my red hair and in my long scarf. My arms moved in seemingly random fashion to allow me to maintain my balance as I glided and turned and twisted. Sure, the wetware didn’t support anything fancy like jumps and spins, but it was enough that I could move, turn, and gradually stop. I had to move slowly, but at least I didn’t fall.

*Eat your heart out, Alex!*

Of course I then ignored Alex calling me from behind. The nerve of him, bringing me here and setting me up! The others lost interest and gradually dissolved into their little individual groups. Some decided to resume skating, some didn’t. A few even attempted some fancy moves. Even fewer succeeded.

It wasn’t long before Alex stopped calling after me. Instead he skated off by himself. I never approached him any closer, but somehow I never skated very far away either. It was strange watching him skate by himself. It made me feel empty. I wanted to be close to him....

...until I remembered that he’d just set me up to make a public fool of

myself! The silly bunnytaur made me *so* angry some times! I *still* don't know why he did what came next. Was it to impress me? Some kind of warped apology? Or maybe just because he so hated being ignored?

Like others, when he called for attention I stopped and stood on my skates on the ice and watched him.

"Betcha I can go faster than anybody else!"

I looked up at the axis of the cylinder we all lived in, sternward of the slowly advancing sun. I could barely see the massive air intakes that cooled the engines and heated the air in the distance.

It wasn't long before a few others decided to take Alex up on the challenge. Two of them were Phil and Mike, both human. The third was that kangaroo morph I knew only vaguely. We all cleared a straight path for the race and waited for it to start.

I didn't realize it at the time, nobody did, but Alex had set it up so that they were skating anti-spinward. In other words in the opposite direction that the cylinder was rotating.

Anyway, someone produced a whistle and when the four were ready he blew it. And they were off!

Whilst the others skated in a more or less conventional fashion, Alex started hopping like mad. Even though I was watching I don't know how he did it, and I've made Ianthe erase any recordings she had because I don't want to know. If I found out, I might be tempted to try the same bunny-headed thing.

Alex's leaps kept him low to the ground, somehow he was using his skates to push him off faster and faster. His limbs were a blur, his ears flapping behind his head as he leaned into the thrust. Soon the others were left far, far behind but Alex didn't stop. Instead he kept going faster and faster. Even when he reached the edge of the frozen pond he didn't stop. Instead he kept hopping through the snow, short and low to the ground, big clouds of white erupting behind him each time he landed and leapt off.

I started skating behind him, faster and faster, trying to keep him in sight. But the wetware wouldn't let me go past a certain speed. What was Alex doing?

*Gilda, I have a message from Alex. Would you like to hear it?*

*Not now, I've got to concentrate!*

*It's marked urgent.*

*Fine. Play it.*

Then I heard Alex's voice in my head:

*Gilda, if you can hear this, then you're about to witness a miracle. Sam has*

*modeled this and he thinks we can do it. He doesn't like it though, but then he doesn't like anything.*

Sam was Alex's AI companion.

I left the ice too and switched over from the odd motions I used to skate to the more typical gait of a bounding deer. And it would have all been fine except for the skates. They messed up everything! After only a few steps I found myself first spinning through the air and then rolling on the ground.

How had I let Alex talk me into this? He was always so... insufferable! I glared at the bunnytaur as he kept right on accelerating, working his way up the long rise that overlooked the lake. What was he *doing*? I began unstrapping my skates, resolving to kill him as soon as I caught up.

Meanwhile Ianthe continued relaying Alex's message:

*I should be able to reach forty meters per second by the time I reach the top. You know what that means, don't you? I'm going to fly!*

Message ends, Ianthe concluded.

Fly? "Dear god," I whispered. "He can't possibly...."

Although by now all four were unstrapped, only one of my skates was completely off. That one slipped from my hands and sank deep into the soft snow as I watched Alex bound the rest of the way up the rise and then leap off of it and over the lake.

I watched in horror as he didn't fall, but kept instead kept going up and up and up.

*Gilda, I'm receiving a request for direct voice communication from Alex. Should I accept?*

In shock I just sat there and watched. Dimly I could hear the awed breathing of some of the others standing on the ice behind me. None of them were laughing. Like me, all they could do was stare slack-jawed at the magic.

*Gilda? Gilda!*

Yes, yes.... I whispered in my mind.

I heard Alex's voice. *I did it! I did it! Isn't this—*

And I remembered that he'd invited the others to laugh at me. He was so callous! *Ianthe, turn him off.*

*Are you sure?*

Yes.

Alex's voice went silent. I turned and yanked off each skate in turn and threw each away, from the ice, from me, from Alex, from everybody. When they were off I got up to my hooves.

*Gilda, Alex is requesting voice communication. He says it's urgent.*

*I don't want to talk to him. In fact Ianthe, I'm never going to talk to him again. Never! And you can tell him that!*

*Sending message. Alex is starting to sound desperate. Are you sure—  
Yes, I'm sure!*

Unable to stop myself, I turned around and looked at where Alex should have been. He wasn't there. I spotted him far in the distance, and closer to the stern than he had been.

*Gilda, Sam has entered a priority alert into the net.  
What?*

*It seems that Alex was too successful. He did cancel his momentum to spinward, which was what was holding him to the ground. But he forgot about the ship's acceleration.*

*I gulped. How long does he have?*

*Our location is confirmed at three thousand, eight hundred and sixty-three point-six meters from the inner stern bulkhead. Assuming Alex started from this point, and also assuming he had no initial velocity vector towards either the bow or stern, he has eighty-nine seconds from his initial launch until impact at a final velocity of eighty-seven-point-two meters per second.*

Suddenly I was galloping as fast as I could go. I bounded across the snow directly sternward, faster and faster. I had to blink my eyes against the grit, or was that tears?

*How much longer does he have?*

*It's been twenty-seven seconds since he went airborne.*

*Only twenty-seven?*

*Gilda, I've been informed that the earliest any rescuer can possibly reach him is four hundred and eighty-two seconds from now.*

*I was gasping for breath. Alex was going to die!*

*Gilda, I have updated information. My initial time estimate did not take into account Alex's terminal velocity. For a baseline human it's roughly sixty meters per second. The therefore currently estimate that a total of ninety-five seconds will elapse before impact. That would leave him sixty-eight seconds.*

I bounded faster and faster. My lungs heaved for breath as I leaned forward and kept my hands pressed to my side. At that instant I hated my antlers, they were slowing me down. I had to do something, but what? What could anybody do?

*Ianthe, what's my relative speed sternward to Alex?*

*The main computer is reporting his current velocity as thirty-four meters per second. The captain has ordered an emergency engine shutdown. However, that'll require nine minutes and fifty-two seconds. The computer estimates an eighty-nine percent probability that the intake draft of one of the engine cooling*

*vents will absorb him. Our current velocity is thirty-one meters per second. Alex's speed is dropping – he's been told to flatten his body in an attempt to increase air resistance.*

*I scowled. It isn't going to be enough, is it?*

*Ianthe paused before answering. No. It's currently estimated he'll impact in ninety-one seconds.*

*My mouth was dry, each breath like ice as I sucked it down my throat. I could feel myself beginning to slow.*

*Ianthe, override my body. Override everything! I've got to catch him!*

*I'm sorry Gilda. You've not yet reached your age of majority. I can't obey—*

*If you don't then Alex will die! I'm his only hope. Please Ianthe! Please!*

*I felt myself begin to stumble, and leapt a bit higher so that I had time to recover. My lungs were on fire. Each breath was torture. My legs weighed as much as they did in the one-gee centrifuge I exercised in.*

*Please Ianthe! Please!*

*Emergency condition accepted. Monitors off. Limiters off. Authorizing release of amphetamines at maximum acceptable dosage.*

*Suddenly my weight fell away and energy filled me. I bounded faster than I'd thought possible. Even faster than when I'd flown with my father before switching into my current body.*

*Gilda, you can maintain this rate of resource expenditure for another twenty-two seconds before incurring permanent physical damage.*

*I don't care! What's my speed relative to Alex?*

*You're now moving at thirty-eight meters per second sternward. Alex's velocity is now holding steady at twenty-five meters per second. Estimated time of impact is a hundred and twenty-four seconds from now.*

*I'm not going to catch him, am I?*

*Ianthe didn't respond.*

*I looked up. I was catching up to him sternward, but he was already a long ways away from me anti-spinward. There was no.... Or was there?*

*Turning away, I began running spinward. My momentum pressed me harder against the ground but I didn't let it stop me.*

*Gilda, what are you doing? Ianthe asked.*

*I'm going to catch him. I can do it. I know I can.*

*But you're running away from him!*

*And, there was triumph in my mental voice even as I forced my body move faster and faster, that's the key. Alex is not moving whilst I'm moving at forty meters per second as the ground rotates around the axis.*

*So....*



*So, by running with the direction of spin, I'm moving forty meters per second faster towards him than if I ran against the direction of spin towards him!*

*But....*

*I'm using the speed of the ground to help me reach him! Ianthe, I need you to tell me when to leap off the stern cliff to catch him.*

*What? Gilda—*

*Just tell me! Best guess!*

I heard her sigh, then she started giving me directions.

Gilda told me later that it took me almost ninety seconds to reach my launch point. All I can remember is a blur. The continuous thunder of my hooves on the snow and on the paths. People leaping out of my way – I didn't have time to warn them, but I found out later that Gilda passed an alert through the net as I approached. My heart was no longer beating, it was a continuous whirr like a speeding electric motor. Even through the drugs, the bio-feedback shutdown, my legs grew heavier and heavier.

*Permanent muscle damage is now occurring.* Ianthe's mental voice echoed through my skull. Permanent damage. I didn't care. Only Alex was important.

Every breath became an effort. My muzzle was covered in spittle and foam, my body was damp with sweat. My toque had blown off at some point and I'd never noticed. Again and again my hooves slid and I almost fell, but somehow, maybe by using the skating wetware, I was always able to recover.

*Left Gilda, a little bit left!*

I obeyed.

*Straight! Keep straight. We'll reach the edge in seventeen seconds!*

Tears streaked my eyes, and soaked into the stiff hair of my face. I still don't know if the tears were from the fact that Alex was about to die, or from my speed. Through my blurred vision I could see the railing at the edge of the stern cliff. It was just over a meter high.

I was so tired!

My ears were flat against my head. I wasn't sure I could feel my legs anymore. I could sense spittle and blood gurgling in my lungs, but with the overrides in place I didn't cough. My hair whipped back and fourth and I could dimly feel their long strands and the trailing ends of my scarf slapping against my neck and back.

*Five seconds.*

I could see Alex now. Just a little further, and then I could rest. My vision narrowed, then blurred around the edges and began to fade.

*Leap Gilda! Leap!*

I did! There was a sharp pain as my forelegs slammed into the railing, and a groan of tearing metal behind me....

...and then I was falling through the air!

For a long bleary moment I didn't know what was going on. Where was the ground? Had I fallen? I couldn't feel anything underneath me.... And then, like an old engine slowly spinning to a halt, my legs gradually stopped moving.

Opening my eyes, blinking away the tears, I looked around. There! I could see him! Alex was *close*! So close that I could almost hear him shouting something. I spun around and faced the ground. The landscape was racing by. I could see the cliff retreating behind me. I maintained my spin until I was looking up across the cylinder. There were the three structural ridges that ran along the inside. They ran at a thirty-degree angle, to create the perfect illusion of level ground while we were spinning and under thrust.

*Gilda! Gilda!* a distant voice called, pulling me back to reality. *Answer me!*

I was still gasping for breath, heaving in huge lungfulls, spraying out spittle and blood.

*Gilda!*

*Ianthe? Have we...?*

*We're going to miss him by about four metres. The air current from the nearest intake is pulling him away. I've kept him and Sam updated. They're trying to angle Alex's body so that the wind pushes us closer, but there's too much difference in our vectors!*

My mind cleared a little. Ianthe was pumping me full of every failsafe drug my body had.

*Gilda! You must stop your spin!*

Through the dense fog of my mind I remembered my freefall training. Sluggishly I moved my arms, tilted my head this way and that. Meanwhile the wind whistled through my antlers. Angling my body I let the howling air grab me, shape me, stop my tumbling. I could see Alex. He was close.

"Gilda! What are you doing?" Alex screamed at me. His voice was shrill, painful in my ears.

I didn't have enough breath to shout back, my lungs were still heaving. I couldn't catch my breath.

*Ianthe... let me know our closest approach.*

*Got it. Estimated closest approach distance one-point meters. Time to closest approach four-point-two seconds.*

It wasn't going to be enough. After all this, it still wasn't going to be enough!

I could see that my course had changed. I hadn't cancelled all of my spinward momentum and now it was pulling me down. Two meters! Two lousy meters! If only....

I fumbled at my neck. It wasn't easy; the whistling air wanted to press my hands and arms flat against me. My limbs were heavy, even though their muscles weren't exhausted the blood that fed them had been drained of almost everything. It was like operating a remote machine on the outside of the hull. Every movement had to allow for a delay between order and action. I got my hands under my scarf and tried to pull it free. It didn't want to come.

*Closest approach!*

I yanked hard, harder. It pulled at my hair and ripped some loose. The scarf shifted a bit more, then hung up again. Ianthe was screaming in my mind and Alex was floating slowly away. I could see his body beginning to tumble.

I yanked again, harder and harder. It felt like I was pulling everything out by the roots. What I needed to do was take my time and patiently untangle everything from all the wind-flapping, but I didn't have time. I pulled again, this time for all I was worth....

And suddenly it came free!

The wind gripped it and swiveled me around. I wrapped the colorful fabric around my left arm, gripping the end in my left hand. I'd rotated all the way around by then and was now facing Alex. He was still so close, and yet so unreachable. Then I leaned forward so that the trail of flapping material would pass as close by him as I could manage. Around me everything was a blur. It'd be so easy to lose focus and just go to sleep!

*Thirty seconds until Alex gets sucked into the engine vents; eighteen seconds until we impact. Distance between us three and a half meters.*

Thank God I favoured long scarves!

*Ianthe! Tell Alex to grab for my scarf. Let me know when he has it!*

I felt a tug. Was it the wind? Another tug.

*He's got it!*

*Tell him to hold on!*

Now I grabbed on with both hands braced myself for what must come next. Then everything snapped tight. I screamed as my arm was yanked out of its socket, and winced as the heavy nylon composite of my scarf dug through my flesh all the way to the bone.

But it held!

My arm held, my shoulder held, my scarf held!

Through the pain I could blurrily make out Alex gripping the other end. Then we separated; he'd lost his grip. It didn't matter though, our vectors were now matched. Alex's blurred form slowly edged closer as my body broke the wind for both of us. Now I was slowing faster than he.

*Fifteen seconds to impact Gilda! Curl up in a ball and relax. It's our best chance!*

I released my deathgrip on the scarf and curled up as it went fluttering away who knew where. I squeezed my head between my forelegs and almost to my back legs. My legs were numb and I think I pulled them against my body but I'm not sure. Finally, the very last thing, I closed my eyes.

I just hoped Alex was doing the same thing.

*Impact in five seconds. Estimated relative ground velocity thirty-two point seven meters per second. Three seconds.... Two.... One....*

Then we hit. The silly antlers ripped themselves out of my skull. Bones broke. The scent of sweet grass filled my nostrils as my face ripped through the stuff, and then all I could smell was blood. Muscles tore, tendons ripped, the universe raced by in a great terrible rush. Finally, even through the blocks and the drugs, the pain hit me as I rolled and skidded to a stop. A thick red pain, a haze of agony.

Mercifully, I blacked out.

I LIVED, OF COURSE. Everyone's heard the rest. The reinforced bone of my skull held fast. Ianthe put my brain in neural stasis, as Sam did to Alex. We both survived, though sadly our bodies didn't.

I woke up drugged, able to communicate only via Ianthe. My father told me that he was proud of me and that I was a hero! The captain was even going to give me an award! I didn't really care, though. All I wanted to know about was Alex. When they told me he'd survived I broke out in tears. Not literal tears, of course; I wasn't connected to the right sort of hardware just then. But you know what I mean!

The captain wanted to lock Alex into human form as punishment, I heard. But his parents objected. They refused to allow their son to be anything other than a bunnytaur. Stupid monoforms! Eventually the captain let them have their way, but decreed that from now on he'd be equipped with an automatic override that would cause him to stop moving if he ever tried to exceed a relative vector over twenty meters per second. They haven't told him yet, and I can't *wait* to see his reaction! I'll be *priceless*. I'm not going to tell him about it, and maybe no one else will either so

that he finds out right in the middle of trying to fly again. Wouldn't *that* be wonderful?

They decided that I could have any body I wanted, though. I decided on another deer, just like what I'd had. After all, I'd barely had time to play with it. It's made me happy, and I wasn't done with it yet.

Why did I risk everything to save Alex? I don't know. I've thought about it a lot lately, mostly because there's not much else I can do right now. And, I've decided that I did it because it was the right thing to do. Because I could.

And because Alex, despite his bunnytaur silliness, is my friend.

They're knocking me out to put me into the new-body tank now. So I'll chat with you later! I'm going to go skating again just as soon as I can – I've decided on that too, you see. I've looked up the person who worked out the deertaur wetware, and we're going to collaborate until every last bug is worked out and Bambi can twist and glide just as effortlessly as everyone else.

*Then* I'll show them something they won't soon forget! Every last one of them!



## WINTER

IT STARTED WITH A SCREAM. A piercing equine sound of panic and terror.

It was spring, or so the calendar claimed, but the snow still lay heavy on the ground. All my snares had been empty, or the thin and stringy animals they'd managed to catch dug out and all the flesh torn from their bones. The source of the scream was there, in the centre of the clearing, surrounded by a pack of wolves. Normally I'd have let the wolves have their way; after all, they had a right to eat too. But the cry *had* been equine, and there are certain things I will defend, regardless of anything.

The pack was thin, half starved, and they were ready to ignore me. They knew me. Oh, we fought over the furs I caught, but they gave me my due as I normally tossed the skinned carcasses out for them to scavenge.

But never an equine. Never one of my kind.

I had my musket on my shoulder and half fired, before I realizing what I was doing. The primer caught, flared, and set off the main charge roared inside the rifled barrel. Yelping, one wolf went down, and the pack turned to stare.

I could see it was a mare. I could smell her scent. Though I respect wolves, and their right to live, this time I shouted out: "She's not for you!"

The wolves stood, staring, the alpha looking me over. I was old, gray speckled of mane and muzzle, but I was strong, and my hooves were heavy and tough. Of course they were strapped to the snowshoes I was wearing, but I doubted they knew that. I doubted they knew they could easily be on me before I could reload my musket. They were smart, but they were

*not* lupus. Giving a loud *yip*, the alpha led the pack off into the woods in search of easier prey. I wished them luck.

It didn't take long for me to walk to the centre of the clearing, but it gave me time to observe. The only tracks in the fresh fallen snow were the wolves. No deer, no smaller animals. And no mare.

Had she been there that long?

By the time I reached her, my heavy fur cloak was off my shoulder and was being draped around her. Draped around her even before I knew what I'd found.

She was equine, without a doubt. The scent, the body form, all screamed that out to me. But she was small. Smaller than myself, far tinier than the bison that had adopted my kind three generations ago when we'd come with the lupus to the New World. The lupus weren't animals like the wolves I'd driven off, but carnivores of upright stance and long civilization. Like my kind. Whereas the lupus greedily consumed the land and goods before them, we took shelter with the bison natives, even as the lupus slaughtered their animal kin and drove them before the advance of their *civilization*. So, like in the Old World, us equines had ended up living on the unwanted lands, on the fringes of civilization. Like the places the bison had been driven to. With them we'd found kindred spirits that seemed to call to us from ages past.

But, though she was equine, she was also not. Like I said, small. Tiny as a colt. She looked up at me from a short muzzle covered in dense wiry fur of pure white. I touched her hand to help her up and could feel the frail bones, the extra fingers. Four compared to my three. And her eyes – they were gray, pure gray, flecked with white. A gray so deep I had to turn away before I drowned.

She stood, the cloak I'd wrapped around her falling from her shoulders like a tawdry rag, grabbing me with her tiny hands. She was thin, oh yes, but full of an impossible strength. Raising herself up, she revealed three-toed ivory hooves standing on the snow.

What was she? I had a single toe on my feet, the bison kind had two, the lupus had four.

With hands that were cold as ice, yet soft and caring, pressing against the sides of my muzzle, she turned it to face her. To face her long flowing mane of ivory filled with the howling wind, filled with the falling dense flakes of a storm. To face her quivering nostrils, clear in the cold wintry air, whereas mine puffed out a cloud of white mist with each breath.

And her eyes—



They were gray, a pure gray, a gray of stormy skies, of snow filled clouds, of howling winter storms. I fell into them, and I *knew*.

Knew of ages beyond counting. Of vast herds of equines that ran on three and four toes. A time before thought, before dreams. Of a time of great spirits, and the release of Death. Of the greatest of the spirits approaching one mare, offering the gift of thought and dreams, needing her to bring a little death for the world to renew itself and survive what had been thrust into it.

I shared her memories of ages upon ages upon ages. Of a time when ice and snow covered the world, unstoppably strong, and she'd run with the winds unopposed by anything upon the Earth. Of the ice receding, her power fading as she hid in the north and waited, coming out once a year. I lived with her as she swept down from the northern wastes, not as a monster, but as a mother, bringing safe sleep even as the storms galloped behind her. In her memories we rode the stars, walking across glistening landscapes of white, watching the wild buffalo mating, their backs dense in a blanket of white. With her I watched a few of them change, growing to walk upright, learning to dream.

With her I stood on the slopes of mountains, glittering shards of ice clinging to jagged cliffs before falling, slamming into fields of drift that tumbled and roared further and further down the slope as she rode the crest. Seas of ice where water gurgled beneath, and strange single horned whales leapt and sung in the water. Black skies covered with endless stars as shimmering curtains of all colours whined and groaned in the heavens. I shared quiet winter nights, calm, the air so cold that she heard the breath of bison cracking as they breathed, great clouds of mist hiding their muzzles. Silent forests, every sound absorbed by drifts of snow glittering in the piercing sun, a kaleidoscope of reflections shattering off each crystalline flake settled against the ground.

And I shared the end each year. Her weakening as the turning season drove her slowly to the high mountains. Water glittering and falling from long transparent icicles. Monstrous roars as snow covered rivers broke free of their imprisonment, massive plates of ice grinding against each other with a sound that shook the world, shattering smaller and smaller as they were swept faster and faster downstream.

And I hugged her cold body, crying the tears she had long lost, as the sweet birds sang, the sound filling her cold heart with a desperate longing even as they sealed her exile to the icy glaciers far above, the tears freezing in my fur.

And I was me again.

Poor Winter, old, so very, *very* old. Bribed with eternity, but with no mention of the cost, of the loneliness. She was so alone, so very tired. And yet, Winter was needed.

Her eyes were just eyes now, even as the setting sun curdled across her mane in shifting patterns of rose and ivory. She couldn't speak, had never learned how. And yet, I knew.

I looked at her, at her begging eyes. Year after year she'd sought out someone and asked. And always she had told them the cost. She'd told them the glories and the beauties. And the loneliness. She was too proud to force someone, too honourable to lie. Still.

I looked at her, my arms on hers growing cold as they held her icy flesh. Icy flesh that was so full of life. I was old, tired. My family was dead, my tribe was dying as the lupus drove them further and further away from their homes. Thoughts of righting the wrongs in the world, thoughts of covering it with ice and snow, filled my mind. Punishing those that had driven the tribe that had adopted me into the lands they couldn't love.

All things pass, in time. Winter was eternal, and the sins of today were but a passing instant in eternity. In an eyewink those who'd wronged me would die, so how much could they matter?

I looked into her eyes one last time. Her heart beat with eagerness, to see the summer again. I swore to stay near her, to keep her safe as long as I could. For I accepted her gift, accepted the exile and the glory.

And we kissed, my warmth filling her, even as her chill froze me into eternity.

*Michael loved the science fiction of Robert Heinlein; it was one of many things that he and I shared in common. The Grandmaster was a heavy stylistic influence on us both; no one can read my own "Freedom City" series, for example, without being reminded of "The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress". In the case of this story, however, Michael went a step further. This work is a deep tribute to Heinlein's "Future History" series. While he probably never intended this particular piece for serious publication – it was written for an informal contest, and borders on outright fan-fic – he was always very proud indeed of "Being a Patrolsentient". So perhaps we who so miss him can be excused for declaring the glass half-full and including it in this volume with appropriate disclaimers. This tale is a veritable orgy of Heinlein imagery; I find new references – and new smiles – every time I reread it.*

*~ Phil Geusz*

## BEING A PATROSENTIENT

GALLOPING DOWN THE CURVING HALLWAY, I felt both eagerness and terror. Doubts surged through me. Why was I here, so far away from my herd? Did I want to be here?

Did I really want to be a member of the Patrol?

The simulated gravity decreased, and I spent more and more time drifting through the air – as opposed to galloping along the rubberized floor – as the ship's rotation was slowly absorbed by the electric motor, now generator, along its spine. The repeating alert klaxon was harsh in my ears, and Captain Yancey's voice, recorded by the automatics, repeated its strident command: "All hands to battlestations! Cadets, man your blasters!"

Sweat soaked my uniform, more from nervousness than exhaustion. Back when I'd entered Hayworth Hall, fresh from Mars and full of dreams of glory, it had all seemed so easy – so obvious! I'd passed the initial examinations, then studied and trained for four years on the PFS *Anthera* in geostationary orbit around Terra. Now I was on my training cruise on the PFS *Triplex*, a C57D class cruiser, and I was having stronger and stronger doubts as to whether the Patrol was right for me.

A bell rang, warning that all rotation had been halted, and I grabbed the handle of the port blaster station's hatch. With practiced ease I swung myself around, let my four booted hooves absorb my momentum, and

then grabbed the gloves designated for my use from the nearby locker and sealed them on. Leaning forward, I snugged up the tube – the hatch hissed shut behind me.

Patrol fusion-drive ships are designed for any station to be manned by any member race of the United Planets, but it was still a tight squeeze for me – or anyone else of my centaur race. Skill born of long practice allowed me to pull myself up hand over hand with my four legs tightly folded against my lower chest. My pearly white cadet uniform slithered against the bulkhead, and I knew I'd have to clean it myself. Captain Yancey ran a tight ship.

The access tube opened up into a spherical cavity – the blaster station – and with practiced motions I buckled myself in, tightening the straps and bars so that I was part of the weapon and the weapon was part of me. Pulling down the helmet, I checked that the breathing system was working and fully charged, pulled it on and then snugged the straps as compressed air puffed into the headpiece, the inflation ensuring a tight fit to my head. I flicked my ears around until they found the earphone cups. Now if there were a hull breach, I could survive a limited exposure to vacuum, my cadet uniform doubling as a temporary space suit. A green HUD appeared on my goggles as the blaster's sensors fed me its view of the ship's surroundings. I grabbed the firing controls, snugging my lower arm and elbows into the pads of both handles.

The system ran a quick check; as the drugs were injected into me, the ready light burned green.

"Blaster One ready!" I called out.

Almost simultaneously the other Cadet, Mattiq Dodsthon, chimed in with, "Blaster Two ready!"

"Hey Mattiq! What took you so long?" I called out.

"Come on, Kyros! It's not my fault I've got a wondrous fluffy tail where you've only got a scrawny one!" Mattiq was an anthro-squirrel and inordinately proud of his tail, though it always gave him problems.

"So shave it!"

"What? And end up looking like Lieutenant Brunn?"

"You're channel's still open, Cadets," barked Lieutenant Brunn, the anthro-rat Comms Officer.

"Cut the chatter, Cadets," Captain Yancey's voice hissed through our headsets. "The bogey is at fifty-seven, one-eighty-nine, twelve. Paint it but don't fire until I give the order."

"Yes, sir!" both Mattiq and I responded.

Moving my arms, my entire orientation twisted around as the blaster

pivoted to aim at the unknown ship. Numbers counted down in the HUD and the primary targeting radar locked onto the unknown. The silvery hull of the *Triplex* filled half my view, and Mars most of the other half. The target was only a tiny dot in the distance.

My headphones relayed the feed from the bridge. "Lieutenant Brunn, hail them again."

"Aye, sir!" Lieutenant Brunn answered and spoke into the comms system. "Unknown vessel, this is the Patrol ship *Triplex*. You are in restricted Martian space. You are ordered to respond immediately. If you do not respond, we will fire on you."

"How long do you want to give them?" That was Commander Myllis, an anthro-equine, our executive officer and astrogator.

"Give them another minute. Cadet Imbreos!"

"Sir?" I answered.

"On my command, and not before, I want you to fire a warning shot five clicks in front of their bow. Understand?"

"Understood, sir. Locking now." With deft movements of my hands and elbows, the turret motors whined and the blaster and I rotated to focus at a point five clicks in front of the unknown vessel. I didn't want to turn away, my blood burned to strike my prey – the rage drugs were working. You've probably heard of them in history. Ever since the last World War, use by the Patrol has been the only sanctioned purpose for the lovely things.

Lieutenant Brunn's voice rasped. "Still no response.... Wait, there's something.... I'll put it on the speakers."

A high pitched whine that oscillated in a random pattern screeched through my headphones and burned into my skull. Suddenly it went silent.

"Sorry Captain," Lieutenant Brunn apologized. "I have no idea what that was."

The Captain didn't respond, but instead barked out, "Cadet Imbreos, prepare to—"

There was a loud buzz and then Lieutenant Thurl, an anthro-badger, burst out, "Missile launch! Bogey has launched!"

My HUD changed to display a second blip. The picture zoomed and locked. Type Five chemical explosive tipped, solid fuel, fifteen minute burn time.

My prey. My kill.

There were voices – I didn't care – and with a loving caress I clenched my triggers. Shards of energetic packets blasted across space. The ship's reactor couldn't generate that kind of power density, so it fed a superconducting

coil that could squash a minute's worth of output into millisecond pulses of high energy particles. I could see their path and made slight corrections until the particle stream intercepted the missile, detonating its fuel in a beautiful glorious burst of light!

"Cease fire!"

Fighting free of the combat rage, I released the trigger and calmed my breathing. My ears gingerly stretched outward cupping the sound.

The Captain continued speaking: "Cadet Dodsthon, aim across their bow, five clicks in advance of their course."

"Yes, sir."

"Cadet Imbreos, you will *not* fire until I give the order."

What? But I—

"I repeat: *Do not* fire until I tell you to!"

The years of training took over. "Yes, sir." My stomach clenched at the thought of my prey being taken by another.

Lieutenant Thurl's voice came over the headphones. "The bogey is warming up its fields and preparing for drive ignition."

Like the *Triplex*, the unknown had a fusion drive and needed to power up both the magnetic bottle to hold the fusion reaction and the magnetic funnel to control the jet for propulsion. The exhaust was hot enough to melt any material containment.

"Any response?" Captain Yancey asked.

"Nothing, sir," replied Lieutenant Brunn.

"Cadet Dodsthon, fire the warning shot."

"Yes sir!" Mattiq responded!

My fingers itched to touch the triggers as the thrill of the kill still burned through my veins.

"Cadet Imbreos, you will *not* fire! Understand?"

"Yes, sir," I muttered.

The particle beam sliced through space and past the bow of my prey. Though not as bright but getting brighter, I could see the slight exhaust plume from the ignition of the target's drive.

"Lieutenant Brunn, order them to shut down their drive or else we will destroy it."

"Yes, sir! Unknown ship! You are ordered to shut down your drive immediately! If you do not, under the authority of the United Planets we will be forced to fire on you. Acknowledge!"

"Anything, Lieutenant Brunn?"

"Nothing since that sound. I know we're transmitting. I guess their radio could be—"

The missile warning buzz hissed over the headset.

"Second launch detected sir! Computer flags it as identical to the first. Bogey has begun acceleration."

"Cadet Imbreos, you will fire at the missile, and *only* at the missile. And only at my order!"

My body was quivering with tension but I managed to keep my voice steady. "Yes, sir." My hands caressed the trigger and I locked the system onto the approaching missile.

"Cadet Dodsthon, lock onto their drive. Prepare to fire upon my command."

"Yes sir!"

A different buzzer tone.

"Energy spike!" Lieutenant Brunn burst out.

The energetic particle packets traveled just under the speed of light; I could see them an instant before they hit. There was a visible flare as they hit the *Triplex's* field and lost some of their energy, but still they impacted.

Lieutenant Brunn continued his report in a calmer tone of voice. "Medium level energy burst, impacting H-three tank eight. One-point-eight PeV strength."

"Ship is ventsing fuel capsain. Loss ressrcised sank eight," Engineering Chief Novath, a Venusian, reported from deep in the rear of the *Triplex*.

"Cadets, fire!" the Captain shouted.

With both hands I clenched the triggers and watched the bursts of high-energy particles speed across space. My aim was exact, and with another burst of light the missile's fuel exploded. Further away, a second stream of particles impacted the stern of my prey. The glow there momentarily brightened and then went dark.

"Got—" Mattiq shouted.

The entire bogey detonated in what would have been a blinding burst of light that the HUD display darkened it to a bearable level.

"Whassa hell?" Lieutenant Novath burst out.

"Cadet Dodsthon, I told—"

"Sir?" Command Mylls broke in. "It wasn't the Cadet's fault. I've checked the recordings and I'm certain the ship detonated after Cadet Dodsthon ceased fire. They may have initiated a self-destruct."

"Ship will stand to General Quarters and will remain at zero spin pending the arrival of the other two unknowns. Cadets stand down. Dodsthon, return to your regular duties. Imbreos, report to my cabin."

There was a spike of pain as the weapons system injected the drug antidote into my arm, and then air hissed as the pads holding my hands

and lower arms, and snugging the helmet, deflated. Angrily I pulled them off and the stench of my rage and fear burst into my nostrils. I carefully unstrapped the harness and slowly pulled myself down the connecting tube into the mercifully sterile air.

Report to Captain Yancy's cabin....

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO GET THERE, and when I did I had to wait. Around me the ship clicked and groaned and faintly gurgled – temperature redistribution along the outer hull and the swirl of water being pumped between inner-hull tanks to adjust the ship's mass distribution – just barely loud enough to hear if you knew what to listen for. Hanging in the corridor I wanted to kick something. Why was I here? Maybe I should just go into private service. Any company would be eager to—

"Cadet Imbreos."

Only years of training allowed me to deftly spin around and look up at the Captain. Carefully and cleanly I gave him the open-palmed gesture of the Patrol. I always got that right, ever since I accidentally gave the old Colt Scout salute when I was preparing to go up to the *Anthera*.

"At ease, Cadet. Follow me in and be seated. Oh, and close the hatch behind you."

The Captain cranked open the hatch and went in first; I followed, and carefully latched it shut. By the time I turned around the Captain was behind his small neat desk and even though we were still in free fall, he looked like he was seated. Pulling up the reader built into his desk, he looked at the screen I couldn't see and called something up. I knew with a sinking feeling that it was my record.

"Cadet Imbreos.... Kyros.... At ease. You're not on parade here."

"Yes.... Thank you, sir."

"Why do you want to be a member of the United Planets Patrol?"

"Sir?"

"Answer the question."

I thought about it. Originally it had been for the honour and the prestige. I'd dreamed of space since I was a colt, and I'd dreamed of being a Patrolsentient. My parents had put up the bond for my trip to Terra; I couldn't fail or quit because if I did they'd lose the bond. That was almost five years ago. Now... what did it all mean? I looked at the Captain, at his vulpine muzzle and his piercing eyes. Even though he was an omnivore, he made me nervous. All sentient who could eat meat did. We'd always feared them more than most of the other races, it's why my kind had so eagerly embraced the Martian offer to immigrate.



"Kyros? The answer."

And now? I'd been looking for a better reason for the last two years. The academy taught duty, sacrifice, honour, free thought. I was caring less and less about the first three and embracing the fourth more and more.

The Captain's expression softened as he looked at me.

I let out a slight nicker. "I'm not sure any more, sir."

He cocked his head. "That may be the first correct answer you've given to that question."

"Sir?" I looked at him, my tail whipping back and fourth.

His left ear, the scarred one, flicked at some imaginary fly. No, not flicked.... He was focussing on *me*. "We're here to enforce the peace. We control the weapons that should never be used. You have to remember that. Always!"

If I hadn't been in free fall I would have scratched the floor with one of my rear hooves. Everybody – I mean *everybody* – told me that, again and again! But this was the Captain, he'd been strict but fair, and he deserved the best answer I could give. I swallowed, my mouth dry. "Sir, Captain, I don't know if I can do that. Maybe I shouldn't be here."

He sighed and licked his teeth. "All of us think that, Kyros. I've lain awake for hours wondering if I can live up to the traditions and honour of the Patrol."

"You, sir?"

"Me – and every Patrolsentient. Your answer gives me hope that you might yet be one of us, but only if you feel it's right for you. You need to decide, and you need to decide soon."

"Yes sir. Thank you—"

"I'm not done yet, Cadet."

"Sorry, sir."

"The first time you fired before I gave the order."

I thought back, mentally wincing at the rage and hatred I'd felt. I remembered the Captain telling me to prepare to fire, and then mindless exhilaration. "I can't remember clearly, Sir. You could be right. The last clear thing I remember is you telling me to prepare to fire."

"At least you're honest." He sighed. "Kyros, I know. I've hunted and I've been under the drugs too. *You* have to control *them*, not the other way around. It's not easy, no. But it's your responsibility and duty. For all you knew, that missile could have had a passenger replacing the warhead. It's been done before."

"Sir?"

"Fortunately, it hadn't. This time."

I didn't say anything.

"Kyros, you've done well on this cruise up to this point. You've got your astrogation up to speed, you've performed well in hydroponics. But you can't disobey orders."

"Sir.... I...."

"Cadet, you're confined to quarters until further notice. Cadet Dodsthon will assume your hydroponics duties."

Closing my eyes I gently snorted. "Yes, sir."

"Kyros, think about this. Decide if the Patrol is for you."

"Sir...?"

"Dismissed."

Using a handhold I pulled myself around, unlatched the hatch, pushed myself out, caught another handle, and shut and latched the hatch. Then I started down the corridor to my quarters.

Was I right for the Patrol? Was the Patrol right for me? Could I live my life with this eternal loneliness, far away from the warmth and comfort of the herd?

I MADE MY WAY TO THE QUARTERS I shared with Mattiq and, after opening, closing and latching the hatch, I sighed. As usual, the air here bore light traces of Mattiq's nutty scent, and that helped me relax.

The room was neat, but then it always was. The very last thing you wanted on any spaceship were loose objects that could go flying around when the ship was under acceleration or evasive. Mattiq's bed was neatly made. Mine, well, it was folded up into the bulkhead, out of the way, as I never used it. Like all centaurs, I slept standing up.

What was I going to do? Or, more to the point, what was I going to do with my life? Captain Yancey was right. Either I had to find a reason, a need to devote myself to what the Patrol stood for, or I had to leave.

Perhaps reading might help. Pulling myself over to the reader that Mattiq and I shared, I strapped my hooves down – that made typing far easier – and turned the system on. Now what? Probably I should be burrowing back into my astrogation studies – they'd always been my weak point. But if I wasn't going to remain in the Patrol, then why bother?

Instead I pulled up a basic history of the Patrol. Oh, I knew it all, it was colt stuff. The whole moral issue of what it meant to be a Patrolsient had been covered extensively on the *Anthera*, so I skimmed through. The end of the last World War, the development of atomic weapons, the final agreements not to use them, the terrorist nukings, the panic and near war, the resulting creation of the United Terra government and its creation

of the Patrol to control the weapons and use them only when necessary to preserve the peace. Exploration, chasing the fanatic carnivores, the so-called Ultravores who'd fled first to Luna, and then to the asteroids. Other planets, first contact, DNA studies proving that all worlds' sentient races were related, the formation of the United Planets and the extension of the Patrol's duties to cover the entire Sol System....

It didn't help. It was too general – a brief list of why the Patrol existed, of what the Patrol had done. Angry, I turned off the reader and leaned down to unstrap myself. I remembered my stint as assistant bomb officer on the PFS *Noralis*, before joining the *Triplex*. Drifting along in orbit, inspecting the bombs that were the threat to keep the nation states, the carnivores who'd stayed behind, and everybody else in line. I knew that not all carnivores were vicious, just some. Many had helped and fought against the Ultravores that had tried to take over the world... but I was never comfortable around them.

I heard the hatch open and looked up as Mattiq pulled himself into the cabin. He looked right back and tried to force the grin from his face as he handed me the zero-gee containers of food.

"Hey Kyros, I heard—"

"Just be quiet."

"But—"

"Shut up about it!" I glared at him and he looked away, and then I relaxed a bit as his familiar nutty scent engulfed me.

"I brought you your dinner." He tossed it at me and I caught. Long practice for both of us had made that second nature, even though I envied how quickly he adapted his toss to the loss of the ship's spin.

"Sorry about that, Mattiq. I just needed to kick something, and, well, you were there." He was my herdmate from when we'd both first arrived aboard the *Anthera* and, as it was my fault, it was my duty to apologize to him.

"Kyros, you worry too much! You know that. You made a mistake. All it proves is that you're a sentient like the rest of us – imperfect – so don't worry about it." He grinned. "And, you know what? I checked the Captain's records. He did the same thing on his Cadet cruise."

I looked at him. "He did?"

"Yup. The Commandant held him back a year, ran him through more psychological training to make sure he could control the drugs, and he got commissioned at the end of his second Cadet cruise."

I kicked my forelegs back and forth in the air as I thought about that.

"See buddy, it's not so—"

He wasn't truly my herd, but he was all I had. I missed my family, my

cousins, my own kind. He deserved to know the truth. "Mattiq," I said quietly, "that's not the problem."

"It isn't?" His tail was brushing the back of his head and shedding yet more fur on his never hair-free Cadet uniform.

I sighed. "Mattiq, why do you want to be a Patrolsentient?"

He looked at me, his dark blue beady eyes unreadable. "Why do you ask?"

"You're right, mistakes happen, and I haven't failed myself out of the Patrol. I just... well...."

"Spit it out, Horsie."

"I don't know anymore if I want to be in the Patrol."

"Wha...?" Then he laughed. "That's a good one! You actually had me goin' for a second."

Mattiq had never treated life completely seriously. "Mattiq. I'm not joking."

"You're not?"

I gently snorted. "No, I'm not. Mattiq, why do you want to be a Patrolsentient?"

"I, well, it's what I've always wanted I guess."

"You want this?" I stretched my arms out indicating the ship all around us. "You remember when you took me to Terra to meet your family? You remember all the looks people gave us when we were in uniform?"

He buffed his knuckles on his sleeve. "Of course. It was great!" His tail fluffed up behind him.

I winced. At times like this I didn't think Mattiq would ever grow up. "Mattiq, you could see the fear in the corner of their eyes. They *know* we control the bombs. They remember the so-called Revolt of the Colonels. How the Patrol would have become a ruthless dictatorship except for Dahlquist."

"But Lieutenant Dahlquist helped create the tradition of the Patrol. He's the one who disarmed all the warheads at the cost of his own life!"

"Mattiq, could you do that if you had to? I don't know if I could. And if I couldn't, then why am I here?"

His tail slowly fell limp.

Commander Mylls' voice burst over the intercom: "Cadet Dodsthon, you were due in hydroponics five minutes ago."

"Great Maker! I'm late! Sorry buddy, I've got to go."

"Hey, wait! Check the pH level first! Tank E-eighteen is never right. And—"

"I won't break anything in your precious hydroponics. Don't worry. We'll

talk about this later. Don't think about it too hard till I'm back, eh?" With that he spun himself around with one hand, undogged the hatch, hurried through it, closed it and latched it, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Sighing, I forced out pent-up frustration with my breath. Mattiq had probably already taken hypnotape number 62A8134, *Simplified Hydroponics for Spaceships, with Growth Charts and Additives Formulae*, the same one I'd taken when we left lunar orbit. And who else could I trust to watch over my plants, if not my best friend and herdmate?

With the ease of long practice, I let myself drift with the slight current from the small fan that kept the air fresh and ate and drank. There were some chopped tomatoes – I remembered planting them – along with lettuce and assorted grains, but it was mostly spiced algae. One gets *very* tired of algae, but every cadet learns a thousand recipes for the stuff. The drink was pure water. When I was finished, I tossed the bags into the reclaimer.

What was I going to do?

A yawn burst out of me.

Well, if I was restricted to quarters I might as well get caught up on rest. I wasn't going to solve this problem tonight. After pulling off my boots and tossing them into the 'fresher, with a touch the static charge that molecularly bonded the seams of my uniform gave way and the waist belt loosened. I wiggled out of the upper part and rolled it off the rest of my body. I shook myself to try and loosen my hair where the uniform had pressed against me. Tossing the uniform into the 'fresher, missing, snorting, pushing myself over, grabbing it, putting it into the 'fresher directly, I then went into the sonic shower and went through its cycle. With that done I felt much better, and then flipped down the tiny sink, pulled out the brush, and went through the fine hair on my hands, arms, neck, upper chest, back, muzzle, and the front half of my rear body, or as much as I could reach. I carefully brushed my fine pointed ears, cleaned the hair off the brush and put it away. Pulling out a small sonic I cleaned my teeth. Leaving the stall I closed and latched the hatch and pulled out a tight nightshirt and put it on. I strapped each of my legs down. Pulling a strap down from the ceiling, or what would be down when the ship was under rotation, I wrapped it under my lower chest, just behind my forelegs. Grabbing a second strap I wrapped it around my upper chest under my arms. Now I was prepared in case the *Triplex* accelerated, or began rotating.

"Lights out."

The lights dimmed and switched off and I stood there, my tail swishing, thinking about my future, feeling my loneliness, and trying to get to sleep. Finally I succeeded....

I WAS ON THE BRIDGE OF THE *NORALIS* as acting Bomb Officer, neat and sharp in my midnight black officer's uniform.... When had I been commissioned?

"Lieutenant Imbreos?"

I recognized the voice as Captain Pilgur, an anthro-rabbit. He'd been the Captain of the *Noralis* when I'd served on her as a Cadet. "Yes, sir?"

"Are you locked on North Penthens?"

Penthens? I pulled my head down against the viewer – the ship wasn't spinning – and peered down at the green-splotched red surface of Mars. The green numbers along the side of the view flashed latitude, longitude and altitude and confirmed that the system was locked on North Penthens. And that it was summer in the northern hemisphere.

My home. My parents. My herd....

All I said, in a calm voice, was "Lock confirmed, sir."

"Lieutenant Imbreos, I confirm and repeat my order for you to release bomb A-fifteen on North Penthens. Commander, log the order and date."

"Logged, sir." That was the voice of Commander Wanth's, the anthro-cougar exec.

Outside of my control, my hand moved and turned the master bomb release key. In the viewer a blinking red dot appeared with a dotted line tracing its expected path.

"A-fifteen released, sir," I heard myself say. "Course on the mark. On board ballistics confirmed active."

"May the Great Maker have mercy on our souls," whispered the Captain....

...and then I was galloping across the commons in front of the town my family lived in during the summer. It was late in the season, I was wearing a thick jacket against the chill. Soon we'd migrate to South Penthens in the southern hemisphere. Behind me, slightly slower, were my two younger brothers, Pamoleon and Teles. We were done with our work for the day, and we were galloping through patches of redweed for the fun of it. I could smell the sweetness of the air, the dust under our hooves, the sweat on our lower backs, and I revelled in the occasional light touch of our bodies one against the other. A comforting reassurance that my herdmates were with me, but nothing more.

"Hey Kyros, what's that?" Pamoleon asked.

I slowed to a canter and turned back to where he'd stopped. Teles was standing beside him and Pamoleon was pointing upward. I looked along the path he indicated. Both their ears were perked upward and the fine fur

that covered all of their bodies was dusted with dirt and scraps of redweed. Far away, its silver skin glinting with reflected sunlight, I could see the *Noralis*, and falling from it I could see the bomb.

All I said was, "That's a Patrol ship in orbit. They're up there to protect us."

Teles reached up and tugged at my arm and shouted out, "I want to be a Patrolsient! I want to fly in a fusion ship and blow up all the Asteroid Triads!" He started making rat-tat-tat sounds.

I shook my head.

And that was when the bomb impacted and detonated, destroying me, my family, my herd, everything in a burst of fusion generated energy....

I AWOKE SCREAMING, still strapped down, still in free fall. Mattiq was floating in front of me, both hands on my shoulders and his contact calmed me more than anything else.

"You were dreaming! I tried to wake you but I couldn't!"

My breath roared in and out of my lungs, I could still feel my flesh searing to the bone, still see my bones being blasted into nothingness.

"Kyros! It wasn't real!"

I focused on him and blinked tears I hadn't noticed out of my eyes, they slid beneath the short wiry fur. I could still see everything burning. "Mattiq...?"

"You were having a nightmare... I think, anyway. You were mumbling, and then you shouted. I looked over and you were shakin' all over and then you went totally spastic!"

I could feel the soreness in my body, and the painfully tight grip of the straps around each of my four ankles where I'd tried to tear my hooves away. I wiped spittle from my lips. "A dream...."

Mattiq, still gripping my shoulders, looked into my eyes. "What was it, Kyros?"

I swallowed but my mouth stayed dry. My breathing began to calm down. "I... I was on the bridge of the *Noralis*, the bomb officer, commissioned. I was ordered to release a fusion bomb on Mars and I obeyed." My voice was cold and emotionless.

"The Patrol has never had to drop a fusion bomb on any member planet. You know that."

"I... I bombed North Penthens...." I could tell from his expression that Mattiq didn't understand. Of course he didn't; he was from Terra. He knew I was from Mars, but the name of my home had never come up. "It was my home."

His grip tightened.

My voice was still cold and emotionless. "I dropped the bomb and killed my family, my herd. And I was there too, on the commons with my brothers when the bomb impacted.... Mattiq," my voice finally broke, "I... I killed myself, my family.... I killed everybody...."

"But—"

I pushed his arms away with mine and turned away at the waist. The straps on the floor kept me from pushing myself further away. "Mattiq, a Patrol officer would have to do that if there was ever a need to bomb North Penthens. Any Patrol officer. Even a Patrol officer from North Penthens. Even me."

"There'll never be any reason to bomb your home—"

"You can't know that!" My voice turned into a whisper. "A Patrol officer must first be loyal to the ideals of the Patrol. That loyalty must supersede any other loyalty, or the Patrol can't work. I can't—"

Mattiq turned away and opened a cupboard.

"Mattiq. I can't do that. I can't be a Patrol officer."

Mattiq turned back to face me holding a drinking bulb and my breathing mask. "Take this and drink. It'll help you sleep. Use the mask if you need it." He looked sheepish. "At least taking a drink works for me. It was just a nightmare, right? Relax, get back to sleep – you'll feel better in the morning." He grinned. "Trust me."

Still numb, I took the bulb and the mask from him. "What time is it?"

"Almost three AM Standard."

"I can't do this any more." Opening my mouth I squeezed a stream of water from the bulb and swallowed it. "I'm not good enough."

"Nonsense! Sleep now, Horsie. We'll talk in the morning." Mattiq turned away, strapped himself back to his bed, and ordered the lights out.

I tried to sleep but I couldn't. I kept seeing my herd obliterated by my own hand. Finally I took the mask, checked it, and put it over my face. I hated wearing breathing masks. However, in this case, the annoyance of hearing the rasp of each breath was more than made up for by the thick comforting scent of my herd. With my eyes closed I could sense them around me, their gentle breathing, their scents, I could even feel the occasional brushes of contact. I fell back into sleep, thankfully dreamless.

BY THE TIME I AWOKE, my mouth was dry and my muscles sore. Pulling the mask off my face, I breathed the dull and empty air, dull except for a hint of Mattiq's nuttiness. "Lights, dim." Mattiq's bed was already made



and he was gone and so were the dishes. Good for him. Well, he deserved this life – *I* sure didn't.

Since the ship was still in free fall, I unstrapped myself, stretched, arcing my back and touching both sides of the cubicle with my outstretched arms, pulled off my nightshirt, used the sanitary facilities – which consisted primarily of a long tube and a suction funnel – and unrolled another of my Cadet uniforms and wiggled into it. Long practice allowed me to put my uniform on quickly. I was able to seal all of the seams shut except for the tail, whose seams I couldn't reach. Pulling a clean pair of boots on over my hooves, raising my rear hooves up and stretching to get them, I activated the static charge and sealed the boots on. Feeling much better, and definitely more awake, I pushed myself over to the reader. After logging in, I found I had a message: CADET IMBREOS: KINDLY REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE'S CABIN AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE.

For a second I panicked – but it couldn't have been urgent; if it were, an alarm would have woken me. I entered an acknowledgement and, after confirming that it was ten-eighteen AM, asked Commander Mylls if ten-thirty was convenient for him. There was an immediate response that it was.

Logging off the reader and folding it flush in the wall, I went into the sonic shower and checked myself in the mirror, ran a comb through my mane once or twice, regretting that Mattiq wasn't here to reach my tail for me, left and closed the stall, undogged the hatch, and entered the hallway. There I closed the hatch, and then made my way up one deck to the Executive's room, quickly jumping from floor to wall to opposite wall, my booted hooves thudding on the rubberized floor and clacking on the plastic-lined walls. I knew the way. Commander Mylls was in charge of us cadets and both Mattiq and we'd been called to his quarters regularly for discussions of, and updates to, our studies. We'd both learned the hard way that he was a stickler for punctuality, so I couldn't dawdle no matter how much I wanted to.

Too soon I was there.

I licked the fur on my palm, ran it through my mane once or twice wishing again that I could comb my tail and seal that seam, and then knocked on the hatch.

"Enter."

Unlatching the hatch I pushed myself in, catching myself on the handle on the room and letting my booted rear hoofs thud against the rubberized deck. I turned, sealed the hatch and, after turning back, saluted. "Cadet Imbreos reporting as ordered."

“At ease, Cadet.”

The anthro-horse Commander was behind his desk and sitting strapped in his chair. In front of him was a reader and I knew what was being displayed. There was something different about his scent though, but I couldn't place it. Fear? Nervousness? Neither of those seemed to quite match. His scent had always made me feel odd because it was so similar, centaur yet not centaur, just like his body was like my front half with my rear body chopped off. I'd had to force myself not to hate him because of that similarity and that difference. And now something else had changed....

“Cadet, your record up until this point has been solid. Not spectacular, but solid.”

I said nothing, but noticed that his black tail was agitatedly moving back and forth behind him, and his gray body was oscillating a tiny bit, because of the mass difference, in opposition to its movement. That was odd – he'd always been so calm before.

“You will become a commissioned officer if you maintain your performance, you know.” He stopped and looked at me, his face telling me he expected a response.

“Thank you, sir.”

He sighed and both his ears lowered until they were pointing off to either side. “Cadet.... Kyros, this can't be easy for you. You're the first centaur to be accepted into the Academy, even though many of your race serve in the Marines. It can't have been easy for you.”

I just watched him.

“Sometimes I think we instill too much obedience in Cadets these days,” he mumbled. “Kyros, all of us, your teachers, your physical trainers, even the crew of this vessel, have tried to be as fair with you as with any other Cadet whilst taking into account your special needs. We've done the best we can to never show favoritism either for or against you.”

Account of special needs? I'd never been told anything about that. I thought things had been fair – had everything I'd achieved been faked as part of my special needs? The sleeping straps? All other land sentients slept lying down – had they added that to *all* ships? I couldn't believe it! And... why was the Commander telling me now?

“The Patrol uses the combat drugs because it has to. The Ultravores that took refuge in the asteroids would paste us if we didn't use those drugs to equalize the field. But you already knew that.”

I nodded. What was he getting at? We'd had almost this same discussion shortly after my first actual gun drill. “Sir? Well, you're right. I did sir. But... thank you for reminding me.”

A whisper of a smile touched his face. "At this point we don't know if the drugs are calibrated properly for you, or if you're not handling them properly. The fact that you obeyed orders the second time suggests the former, but there's no way to be sure until we get back to Terra. Therefore I've had to place a conditional reprimand in your file. The Captain has confirmed this. Understood?"

A feeling like an electric shock stabbed through my heart. A reprimand. It would always hang over me, if it was upheld. It.... I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I remembered the dream. I wasn't worthy of being a Patrolsentient. When we got back to Terra I'd resign, and then it wouldn't matter.

So why did my stomach still feel sick?

I noticed that the exec was looking at me, expecting an answer. "Yes, sir. I understand. Is that...." I stopped. My parents had taught me never to hide things. Things hidden would fester, and it would become harder and harder to bring them out.

He looked at me expectantly, his long dark gray snout leaning towards me. There were scratches around his nose, just beginning to heal. Where'd they come from? But it wasn't my place to ask.

"Sir, I wish to resign from the Patrol upon our return to Terra." There. It was said.

He snorted, and then there was a long moment of silence before he responded. "May I ask why?"

"I don't think I can live up to the duties of a Patrolsentient."

"Kyros, I told you that the blaster firing may not have been your—"

"Sir, it's not that."

He looked at the screen, tapped it, and then looked back at me. "May I ask why?"

"Sir, what if I'm required to bomb North Penthens?"

"North.... That's not likely to come up."

"But sir, Commander, the probability is not the point. A Patrol officer is loyal to his oath. According to that oath, if there were sufficient cause, the Patrol would be required to drop a fusion warhead on North Penthens. I... I couldn't do that, sir."

He looked at me, frowning. His tail stopped, and then began whipping back and forth far faster than it had before.

"Sir, if a Patrol officer is only loyal to his oath when being loyal does not cause him any duress, then the whole system breaks down!"

He turned away from me, shut off his reader, and folded it back down into its compartment in his desk. Clasp his hands in front of him, he

started rotating his thumbs around each other. His tail was almost a blur. “Kyros, if the possibility of your bombing North Penthens didn’t worry you, I’d have you off this ship and on Mars within the hour! You’d be far too dangerous to be trusted with the terrible weapons the Patrol has the burden of being forced to manage. I don’t think even the Patrol shouldn’t be trusted with those weapons, but what choice do we have?”

Startlement burst out of me. “Sir?”

“Kyros, the Patrol does not expect a sentient to have either the Maker’s perfection, or a complete lack of freewill. Certainly the Doubt course on the *Anthera* proved that!”

A slight smile crossed my muzzle as I remembered my first reaction to that course. I, and the other three members, were asked to prove that the Patrol was a detriment to the advance of sentient civilization on Terra. Later I’d found out that the course was implemented to force cadets to think for themselves, and not just obey instructions.

“Cadet, since the sentients we know of are all imperfect, Martians being a possible exception, the Patrol works on the principle of calculated risk. The chance of a threat to North Penthens in your lifetime, and of your being aboard the nearest Patrol vessel, is virtually nil. But if that horrible combination did occur, your commanding officer would probably lock you in your cabin rather than take a chance on you. Now if the Captain ordered *me* to bomb my hometown, slight as that chance would be, I would... I would ask him to lock me in my cabin.”

“Huh...?”

“Kyros, the Patrol teaches all of us everything it can about what our civilization stands for, and what the morals and ideas of the perfect Patrolsentient *should* be. But it does not expect miracles. We’re all made by the Great Maker, and none of us are perfect. Each of us must do all that he or she can, and that is all anyone can ask.

“Being a Patrol Officer is assuming a trust. The Patrol trusts that you will do the best you can, and act as best you can, within the rules, guidelines and principals of the Patrol. We’ve trained you as best we can, and we’ve trained you to question whether your orders are right. You’ve been told repeatedly in class after class that each of us needs to question the orders we’re given. If we cannot obey them, then it is our duty to inform our superiors and respectfully refuse. We will then be confined to quarters and the next in line will be given the order. If they refuse, and everybody else refuses, than the order will not be carried out.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!”

“Not for a military organization, no – but the Patrol is civilian. We are

policesentients. It's a weird paradox but ultimately true. And the reason for this paradox is that the Patrol has awesome power, and there is no outside force to check them. They... we control all the weapons that nearly destroyed Terra, and we control the means to deploy them without fear of retaliation. The Patrol is the best solution to the modern technology of war, and I wish there were a counterbalance but there isn't. The Patrol could become the most unbreakable tyranny this system has ever seen. But they – we – haven't, yet, and part of the reason is that each of us has the right and the responsibility to refuse to obey an order.

"Each of the Four we honour by adding them to each roll call refused orders of their superiors. It turned out that they were right, and by following their heart rather than their Commander's orders, they did the right thing and saved this system from eternal horror."

I remembered Lieutenant Dahlquist.

"Cadet, are you sure you want to resign? I normally wouldn't ask, as it's always your privilege to choose, but I need to know."

I thought about it. All the Commander had really done was remove my cause for resigning right now. But, he hadn't helped me answer the real question, the question of whether I wanted, no, whether I was worthy of being a Patrolsient. I let out a soft nicker of frustration. "Sir, I... I'm not sure."

He gave a wry grin. "You're not even twenty T-years.... I still haven't found my definitive answer to that question. Maybe you shouldn't be a Patrolsient."

"Sir?"

"Regardless, are you up to returning to duty?"

"I..." Was I? I could sulk, think more and more, panic more and more, have more and more nightmares. Or I could work at it, experience it, and hopefully find out whether or not I was worthy. It was my choice, my responsibility. "I... I think so sir."

"Good, because I have a task for you. How familiar are you with the equatorial region of Mars?"

The equatorial.... "A little bit. I've passed through it with my herd when we migrate. I've snuck off the transports and wandered a little before being caught. But that's it, I don't think anybody other than the Martians know any more."

"I guess it'll have to do."

"May I ask why, Sir?"

"Have you heard of the Cruinni Stone?"

The Cruinni Stone? Who hadn't? It was found on Terra's Moon, shortly

after the Ultravores had been driven off Luna. I managed to keep the surprise out of my voice. "I have, sir."

"The three bogies detected by the Luna telescopes were not the reason we were sent to Mars. The burn was only to get here sooner. The real reason *Triplex* was diverted here was because the Martians claim to have translated the Cruinni Stone."

"By the Maker...."

"They refused to transmit any details, but instead requested a Patrol ship visit them and pick up what they discovered and transport it to Terra."

"And we're that ship, sir?"

"Yes. The *Triplex* is sending a jeep down to the indicated place. I'll lead. You two Cadets will accompany me."

"We will, sir?"

"You because of your knowledge of Mars. Like you said, it's not much, but none of the rest of us know any more than the formal survival hypno-tapes. Mattiq will be along to man the turret blaster."

"Sir?"

"The Captain believes the ship that attacked us somehow found out about the translation and was here to take the information back to the Asteroid Triads. The two remaining ships are due to arrive in three days. They're probably from another Triad faction."

"But...."

"Don't worry, Cadet, we'll be back long before they arrive. If we're delayed, the captain wants the best gunners on the jeep. The *Triplex* can take care of herself. You two aren't the only gunners."

"I.... Of course, sir."

"Be ready to leave at fourteen PM. It shouldn't take more than a day, but be prepared for a week just in case."

"I.... Yes, sir. A question, sir?"

He nodded.

"Who's going to take over hydroponics with Mattiq and I gone?"

"Sub-lieutenant Gometh."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good lad. Dismissed."

I spun around, unlatched the hatch, pulled myself through it, latched it again, and then started bounding down the passage leaping from floor to wall to wall. I had to tell Mattiq the good news.

The Cruinni Stone! I couldn't believe it! Everybody knew that there had been a previous civilization in the Sol System. Radioactive craters on all three member planets and on Terra's moon had been dated to relatively

clean fusion detonations roughly fifty thousand years ago. A plant very similar to Martian airweed had been found growing at the poles of Terra's moon and nobody could figure out how it had evolved there. An identical DNA marker had been identified in all sentient races, and nobody could figure out a way it could have evolved independently on three worlds. The most widely held belief was that there had been an advanced civilization on a planet that once existed where the asteroid belt is now, but that theory had never been proven. It was believed that the obviously machined inscriptions on the Cruinni Stone might provide some answers, but they'd never been translated.

And now I might be one of the first sentients to find out! For the first time in years I was glad to be a Patrol Cadet.

With that thought I resumed my bounding down the corridor and stopped in front of the quarters that Mattiq and I shared. I unlatched the hatch and slowly pushed it open as I still remembered the time Mattiq had rushed in and slammed the hatch into my rump, poked my head in, and shouted out, "Mattiq!"

He wasn't there.

We weren't at battle stations. Mattiq would be in our quarters if he was studying. Where...?

Hydroponics. He'd taken over my duties there.

Only through the force of long training and repetition did I remember to dog the hatch before I resumed bounding towards the core of the ship and hydroponics.

AS IN MOST VESSELS, hydroponics was wrapped around the axis of the *Triplex*. The axis proper consisted entirely of the windings of the motor that would spin or unspin us, so for all intents and purposes hydroponics was the ship's core. The hatch, although vacuum tight like all the others in the ship, was not just a simple hatch; it was the first hatch of an actual airlock. Ships are made of metal and electronics, neither of which likes the moisture that hydroponics was just full of. As the green light was on, I knew that the inner hatch was closed, and thus quickly unlatched the hatch and pulled it open and pushed myself in. The airlock was long, longer than the external airlocks, but that was because the primary water tanks were wrapped around hydroponics and the airlock had to pass through them. We needed all that water for drinking, for an emergency hydrogen and oxygen supply, for readily-mobile mass to rebalance the ship, and for shielding when the crew needed shelter from violent solar storms. Pulling my tail in to keep from getting caught in the hatch, I closed the outer hatch

and pulled myself along to the inner hatch. By the time I reached it, the light at the latch of the inner hatch had turned green and I opened it.

Entering hydroponics was similar to when I'd entered the FS *Tricorn*, the liner I took from Mars to Terra. Before then I'd only breathed Mars' thin atmosphere, and even the two-thirds T-standard atmosphere on the passenger ship felt to me like breathing a thick syrup.

Closing the hatch behind me, the first thing that hit me was the wall of moisture. Unlike everywhere else on the ship, the walls of hydroponics were carefully lined and sealed with plastic. No unprotected metal existed anywhere in this room. Holding the handle beside the hatch, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the second shock: The scents! Scents of greenery, of life, of pollen drifting through the air, of dampness on leaves. Faintly in the distance I could hear the soft whirr of the ventilation fans that pumped out the oxygen rich atmosphere, ran it through filters to trap excess moisture, and cycled it through the ship, and the soft whirr of the other fans that brought the ship's air back here. My ears flicked around and back and forth until finally I could make out the rustle of leaves in the distance towards the bow. Pushing myself off the handle by the hatch, I dove through the leaves and fronds enjoying their caress as I drifted by. This was as close as I could get to being with the herd off Mars, and I luxuriated in the experience every time I came. I passed tanks of *Spirulina planensis* algae which made up the majority of hydroponics due to its efficiency, interspersed with tanks of various vegetables that were present primarily to vary the diet of the ship.

"Mattiq? You in here?" I was careful to stay near the wall as most of the plants were far too fragile for me to pull myself along on them.

"Hey Horsie! They let you out of solitary!"

There was a rustle in front of me and I saw Mattiq pulling himself along the side before stopping and waving. He'd stripped down to the waist, like I had. Not only was hydroponics damp, it was hot. As I'd learned the hard way, in free fall it was better for the smaller mass to move towards the larger. I waited for Mattiq and while waiting called out, "Nutty, you heard?"

"About Mars? By the Great Maker, yes! We're goin' to Mars. Mars!"

I braced myself against the wall. I could smell him clearly now, even over the wall of scents around me. And his strongest smell wasn't nuts, it was wet fur. "Been there, done that. I think Venus is a far more interesting place."

Mattiq caught my shoulder and cancelled his momentum. "Especially if the bars Chief Norvath says we're too young to hear about actually exist."

"As though we'd ever be allowed to go there."



"Does it really matter though? They say they've translated the Cruinni Stone! Maybe it'll tell us how to build better drives than the one we developed out of the wreckage we found. Maybe we'll even be able to go interstellar!"

"It's probably just an inventory of food rations."

"For the Maker's sake, where's your sense of adventure, Kyros!"

I smiled. It was hard not to when bombarded with Mattiq's enthusiasm. "We should go and get ready then." I checked the watch built into my uniform sleeve. "We've only got two hours."

"I need to get showered first."

I snorted at that. His pearly whites were stained with green, and the upper portion which was hanging down behind his waist was wet and I could see branches and leaves here and there in the folds. "You got that right. I'll lead, you follow." I was already turning around back towards the entrance.

Now behind me Mattiq tried to muffle a snicker.

"Okay, Nutty. Spit it out."

"You know Horsie, I still can't believe you need help to get dressed. Maybe I should just strap myself to you full time."

What was he—? Oh right, around my tail. But.... "Mattiq? Have you seen Commander Mylls today?"

I felt Mattiq snug my uniform closed as he answered, "I saw him first thing. He told me about us going to Mars."

"What did.... Did you notice anything odd about him?"

He pulled himself along the wall and in front of me, twisting around to face me, tickling my chin with his tail as he did so. "Well...."

I shook my tail to settle my uniform more comfortably around it. "Mattiq. He knows about my physical limitations. I've had to see him early before to discuss my studies and every time he finished sealing my uniform just before I left."

"He was probably busy."

"Mattiq, that wasn't the only thing. He talked about special treatment of me."

"Special treatment?"

"Yea. He said that everybody had done their best to never show favouritism to me yet also to take into account of my biological and psychological differences."

Mattiq hesitated before answering. "Oh. I guess that's just fair. I guess."

"Nutty, what's wrong? Out with it."

He sighed and closed his eyes. "Remember when I was called to the Commandant's office that first week and the *Anthera*?"

"Yes...."

"He.... Well.... By the Maker, forget it! It's just not right that the Commander told you! He's full of it. I.... Well.... Kyros, just remember that I'm your friend. Nobody told me to do anything, nobody had to give me orders."

What was he talking about? "Of course you're my friend! Why would I ever doubt it?"

"I.... Oh, it's nothing. What else did the Commander tell you?"

"He gave me a long lecture. In parts of it, it seemed like he didn't consider himself a member of the Patrol. A couple of times he even seemed to think that the Patrol was a bad thing. And he *smelled* odd."

"Come to think of it, I did notice something. Not his smell, you're far better at that. Did you see his tail?"

"No...." then I remembered. "I did. It was whipping back and forth like he was angry. I've never seen it like that."

"That's it exactly." Mattiq shrugged. "I guess he's just nervous about going to Mars."

"Possible."

"You worry too much buddy! Now come on, I've gotta shower and change, you can go and grab our training tapes for the next week."

I snorted. "It's not like the Commander'll let us get behind on our studies."

"Pegged it in one, little Horsie. Let's get going!"

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to get everything together. Sub-lieutenant Clarenth had everything put aside, packed, and clearly labeled. I asked him about Sub-lieutenant Gometh and was told he was probably in the aft equipment bay pulling out parts to fully seal the damaged H<sub>3</sub> tank.

I made my way there and, grabbing the carefully placed handle to stop, I unlatched the hatch and stuck my head in. "Sub-lieutenant Gometh?"

I could see him inside, and could make out Lieutenant Novath's green tail behind some racks.

Sub-lieutenant Gometh turned around, his ears proceeding his head. Even though he didn't need to, he ducked far under an overhead pipe. It was standard for anthro-deer to cut off their antlers whilst in space, and Jonthon Gometh was no different; he still moved as though he had his full rack. "Oh, Mattiq, it's you. Do you need something, Cadet?"

"Well, I don't really need anything, but... you're taking over hydroponics while I'm gone, right?"

"Yes, I—"

"You need to cross-pollinate those new tomato plants in three days. Bin C-twelve, about a third of the way from the bow. You won't forget, right? Just in case I'm on Mars longer than a day that is."

He laughed, "Don't worry, Cadet. I won't forget. I'll make sure to go through the charts. You—"

"I updated them. Oh, and you need to be careful of—"

He placed his arms at his waist. "Cadet. I ran hydroponics during *my* Cadet cruise. Everything will be fine."

"Oh. Thank you, sir!"

Yanking my head out I shut the hatch to the sounds of the engineer's hissing laughter and made my way to the boat bay. The *Triplex* carried two jeeps, the type 15JS solely for space use, and the type 12JA for landing. Both were also useable as lifeboats. We'd use the 12JA to land on Mars. After grabbing a pair of my gloves from the locker at the entrance to the bay and putting them on, I pulled my way towards it through the tightly packed equipment, fuel and charging cables. It wasn't long until I could make it out.

It was small, rated only for ten passengers and crew along with a tonne of cargo. The tail and rudder were fixed in place; right now the main wings were folded flush against the body, and the landing gear was out and clamped to the floor. She had a hydrogen-oxygen liquid fueled rocket nozzle at the stern and two turbojets, one under each wing, along with vectored thrust that could originate either from the turbojets or from smaller rockets along her belly. She was not painted, but instead polished a gleaming silver except for the plain script of her name under the cockpit window. It was too far away and at too bad an angle to read, but I knew it by heart: *Triplex 2/2: Trilethones*. When I got closer I saw that Commander Mylls was already there, crouched under the port engine.

He must have heard me as, with a click, he closed the hatch and began screwing it shut. "Ah! Cadet Imbreos. You have everything you need?"

"Yes, sir. I've got the tapes, and Cadet Dodsthon should be here shortly."

"Good. Get on board, I'll join you in a moment. You can take the copilot's seat; Dodsthon will man the turret." There was a brief whine as the powered screwdriver sank a screw. "We're due to leave in... twenty-four minutes, so I hope Dodsthon isn't late."

Pulling myself in through the open hatch, I stowed the training tapes in a padded compartment just inside the entrance and made my way towards the bow. The cockpit was small, as on most auxiliary craft, and I pulled myself over to the co-pilot's chair and started setting it up. Commander Mylls had already adjusted his so I turned to mine. Stretching out the lower portion of the seat, I pulled the back slightly up and pushed the lower portion as far down as it would go. Grabbing hold of the handles above the seat, I rotated myself around, leaned far forward, and pushed myself down so that the back of my horse half pressed against the lower part of the seat and the back of my upper half pressed against the top of the seat. As I leaned forward, I folded my legs against my lower chest, and then strapped both them and my lower chest down snugly. Leaning back I did the same for my upper half. A few final adjustments of the seat position and I began running pre-launch checks.

I was barely halfway through when I heard somebody come in and scented the distinctive scent of Commander Mylls. It still had the oddness that I'd sensed in his office.

"Everything checking out, Cadet?"

Turning my head to look at him, I responded: "So far. I stashed the tapes in bin eight."

"And now, all we need—"

With my sensitive ears I heard another person pulling their way through the hatch and I recognized Mattiq's nutty scent before he spoke.

"I'm not late am I?"

Grinning, I kept going through the checklist written above me. I had it memorized, but redundancy in critical things had been drilled into me.

"Cadet Dodsthon, you do know that we're due to depart in six minutes? Cutting it a little fine, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry sir. I had to get cleaned up, I had to finish a couple of things in hydroponics, and—"

"Well, go and strap yourself in the turret. Cadet Imbreos is almost ready here."

"Yes, sir!" Mattiq's voice, and scent, confirmed he was happy to get off that easy.

But *why* was he getting off that easy? Commander Mylls had always been a stickler for punctuality and efficiency. This wasn't like him. I turned back to the systems check and tried to ignore my worries. If something was wrong, surely the Captain would have noticed. Wouldn't he have? Maybe it was just stress....

I finished off the checklist and turned to see that Commander Mylls was strapped in too. "Everything's in the green, sir," I told him.

He spoke into the microphone: "Cadet Dodsthon? You strapped in and ready?"

"All set, sir." His voice came out of a speaker overhead, oddly echoing from the helmet that had sealed around his head. "Everything confirms readiness."

"Acknowledged. Ready to get going, Kyros?"

"Everything's prepped and ready."

"Let's get locked in then."

I reached up and pulled down my helmet, the same style as the ones in the ship's weapon turrets. After putting it on, I snugged its straps as the compressed air tightened it around my head. The HUD popped up and I checked the system readings. Everything was green. "Onboard systems report ready for launch, sir."

"Acknowledged, Cadet." Commander Mylls must have put his helmet on at the same time I put mine on. He toggled a switch and spoke over the radio. "*Triplex*, this is Jeep *Trilethones* reporting ready for launch."

Lieutenant Brunn's voice hissed over my headphones. "Acknowledged, *Trilethones*. Will download final navigation information upon your signal."

"Understood. Cadet Imbreos?"

I clicked a toggle on the board in front of me. "System ready, Commander."

"We're ready to receive, *Triplex*."

"Acknowledged. Sending now."

I watched the data scroll by along one side of my HUD, too fast to read. The system beeped in my ear. "Download complete and verified Commander."

"We got it clean, *Triplex*. We're ready for launch."

"Acknowledged, *Trilethones*. Depressurizing bay."

I could dimly feel the thumping through the ship.

"Bay is clear, *Trilethones*. Opening bay door."

The projected view in my HUD showed the door slide open revealing the shining red and green of my home.

"System shows ready for launch, *Trilethones*. Removing umbilicals."

"Acknowledged, *Triplex*."

The jeep shuddered as the fuel and power lines disengaged.

"*Triplex* shows ready for launch. Confirm, *Trilethones*."

"*Trilethones* affirms ready, *Triplex*."

"Understood. Captain Yancey wishes you luck. Launching in five... four... three... two... one.... *Launch!*"

With that, the mechanical catapult yanked us forward, my momentum pushed me back into my seat, and we shot out of the boat bay and into orbit around Mars.

The electronically created vision in my HUD shrunk the three-hundred-sixty degrees around us into a curved band within my view allowing me to effectively see all around. Below was the curving red and green blue lined sphere that was Mars. Behind us was the *Triplex*, her cylindrical inhabited section making up the bow, with various sensors extending on booms from the very stem, and then a long support strut with the fusion drive and heat radiator fins at the stern. I could clearly see the web of conductors that would shape the magnetic exhaust funnel. The *Triplex* glistened polished silver in the sunlight, and I could see the ugly scar of the damage to tank eight along the strut between the main hull and the engine. Further in the distance I could see Phobos, blackened and pocked from whatever had consumed all the radioactives that had once existed inside her.

And all around, everywhere around, the glistening stars. For a second I was back aboard the observation lounge of the *Tricorn*. I remembered the immeasurable joy I'd felt as I finally knew in my blood and heart that I was really on my way to be a Patrolsentient... but then I remembered where I was. Every time I went out, for a second it was like that time, full of the dreams and hopes that now, too soon, had faded into my current uncertainty.

"Cadet Imbreos, status!" the Commander's voice barked in my ears and I shook my head to focus back on my duties.

"System shows no ships other than *Triplex*. All reads green, sir."

"Acknowledged, Cadet. Cadet Dodsthon, status?"

In my condensed vision I could just make out the turret along the top of the *Trilethones* in which Mattiq was strapped.

"My board shows green, too. No hostiles. sir."

"Cadet Imbreos, do you see our flight path?"

"Yes, sir." I could clearly see the line of rectangles, just under ninety degrees to our port.

"Keep an eye on them. Flag me if we go off course by more than two degrees."

"Understood sir."

In my display I saw puffs of gas and felt the *Trilethones* rotate ninety

degrees to starboard until another puff of gas stopped the rotation. The rectangles were now directly to our rear, passing rapidly.

"All hands, prepare for one-half-gee thrust for three minutes, eleven seconds starting in twelve seconds... mark. Acknowledge."

I tightened my grip on the armrests of my chair. "Ready, sir."

Dimly I heard Mattiq's voice state, "Braced, sir."

I watched the chronometer in my HUD count down and listened to the Commander count off the last five seconds. Then, with a roar that shook my bones, the sound transmitted through the jeep to my body, the main engine ignited. In my HUD I could just make out the faint blue-yellow exhaust. My momentum pushed me back into my seat and I watched the course rectangles move past gradually slower and slower as we decelerated in our orbit along the planned flight path. The jeep shook slightly with the roar of the engine and I watched the *Triplex* recede behind us.

"Engine shutdown in five seconds... four... three... two... one.... Off."

The *Trilethones* was suddenly silent. More puffs of gas to spin us to port and, once we'd rotated just under one-hundred-eighty degrees, still more puffs of gas to stop the rotation. Mars was now noticeably closer.

"Course status, Kyros?"

"In the green, sir."

Another pair of gas-puffs and the nose was pointed a few degrees further away from Mars.

"Deploying wings."

With a whine of electric motors, the wings slowly moved out from the body towards their hypersonic reentry position. The amber light in my HUD turned green as the wings clunked into place, a sound I felt in my bones.

"Wings show locked, sir."

"Thanks, Kyros. All hands prepare for reentry. Acknowledge."

"Locked and ready to go, sir," I responded.

"All clear up here," returned Mattiq.

I loosened my right arm and gently moved my hand loosely around my control stick. If something happened to Commander Mylls, I'd be ready to bring her down and land her on her belly jets.

A faint, high pitched whistle became apparent in my ears, and the jeep began to ever-so-slightly creak and groan. I could see the cherry glow starting along the wings' leading edges as we fell downward. In my HUD, the flight path rectangles shook just a bit in opposition to the slight jerks of the jeep. I could feel the slight deceleration pulling me gently forward, but the belts kept me snugged in. We continued to descend. The underside

grew hotter, the buffeting worse, the high pitched whistle deeper and louder, and our deceleration greater. We fell further, decelerating. Down to the layer of the highest clouds. By then we were through the worst of it and the wings and hull were radiating their heat, and the buffeting had subsided. I watched our speed countdown closer and closer to mach two, at which point we'd engage the jets. We reached it and, with a roar, the turbojets burst into life.

There was a loud bang – the jeep jumped – and half the status lights in my HUD popped to red! A harsh buzzer warned of a problem. By the Maker.... Then I saw the port engine. For some reason it had suffered a catastrophic failure – and was now nothing but a sparking mount!

“Commander!”

“Report our status to the *Triplex*, Cadet! We’ve still got—”

I switched to the ship to ship frequency. “*Trilethones* to *Triplex*. Mayday! Mayday! Port engine has suffered total failure. Repeat, port engine—”

The whine of the starboard engine sudden zoomed to a higher and higher pitch, there was another bang and *it was gone, too!*

With it went the radio and most of the rest of my lights turned to red. The buzzer became more strident.

“Cadets! Scan for a landing spot, anything.” I heard him flicking the toggles for the rocket but nothing happened except more red lights appeared in my HUD indicating that the rocket was down too. “By the Maker, we’re going to have to glide in! Kyros, did you get through to the *Triplex*?”

“Sorry, sir. The second engine seems to have taken the entire external comms with it.”

“Kyros! Prepare to dump fuel!” With no engines, fuel was just an explosion hazard.

Forcing down panic I felt around for the key and grabbed it. “Prepared to dump, sir!”

“Initiate dump in five... four... three... two... one.... *dump!*”

I turned the key and self-contained motors opened emergency clamps and the fuel tanks, both rocket and jet, dropped away behind us. “Fuel dumped, sir.”

“Understood. Good job, Kyros.”

My HUD still displayed our planned flight path, and I saw that we were drifting down and out of it. There was nothing we could do about it. After the fuel dump was complete, I switched from the now-distracting three-sixty view to a frontal ninety-degree cone. The world stretched and magnified into sharp relief. Below I could see reddish sand dunes scattered with dead clusters of stalks along with faint clouds of blowing sand that



skirted the surface. I looked around for something, anything, and then in the distance to port I saw a glint of blue green.

"Commander, go port. There's a canal," I burst out. "We need to land—"

"In the canal—"

"No sir! Don't! That'll wreck us for sure!"

"But, it'll be flat, best—"

"Sir, don't, please! Trust me."

I could hear sudden panic in his voice. "I.... Okay, Cadet." He forced it down. "Alongside?"

"That'd be best, sir, just outside the line of weed too."

"Acknowledged. All hands! We're going to be coming in awful fast, be ready for impact."

Mattiq and I both acknowledged.

We were closer to the ground now, I could make out details of scattered rocks, ancient sinkholes, crumbled mounds of shattered flat shales. Far off to port I saw the glittering glass of a Martian city and I wondered if it was abandoned or not. Ripping my gaze from it, I concentrated on the canal and the ground nearby. It glittered blue-green and I could see the dense plant life on either side of it. The ubiquitous airweed; small stubby bluespikes, named for their colour; long-leafed canal cabbage, their leaves rolled out across the ground to gather the sunlight. The altimeter showed us barely five hundred metres above the ground. Below us the sand had given way to shattered crags of rock. If we impacted here we'd be dead.

"Anything, Cadet?"

"Nothing! Just rocks! We have to keep going, there's got to be something!"

"There'd better be or we'll have to risk the canal."

Crashing into the rocks would be only slightly less fatal, but at this point we didn't have anything to lose.

"Kyros!" It was Mattiq. "In front and port. I think I see sand, maybe half a click north of the canal!"

Looking that way I saw that there was indeed a sandy plateau.

"Landing spot, sir! Radar makes it four point two kilometres north by northeast."

"Got it! Dumping altitude."

I watched the sand get closer. The plateau was small, but it'd have to do. I could see our shadow now racing across the plants. Canal cabbages twitched their leaves, but the shadow passed long before they decided to roll up for the night.

"One thousand metres, sir!"

"I know, I know! Let me concentrate!"

I shut up and watched, helpless, my life in the hands of the Commander. Our height fell further, I could see the turbulence of our passage ripping leaves off the greenflowers. Our velocity was down to a hundred metres per second. Our altitude fell to a hundred, then to fifty. We were over the sand. Commander Mylls suddenly jerked the nose hard up, until it was vertical and I was shoved towards the floor. Our velocity dropped and our altitude rose. The Commander lost control as *Trilethones* stalled. It fell sideways, spun as one wing caught the air. With a screech of metal, the wind tore off that wing and we fell into the sand, sliding forward. I was yanked forward against my straps, suddenly unable to breathe. Sand filled my projected view. I could hear it hissing and tearing at the fuselage, my legs painfully crushed into my lower chest.

We stopped and I jerked forward, and then fell back into my cushioned seat gasping for breath.

We'd made it!

I unstrapped myself and with a sigh of relief I stretched out my legs. I could feel the pull of Mars, a third of a standard gee. I felt a bit heavy, the *Triplex* had generated a quarter gee in flight to minimize the Coriolis force.

"Kyros, what's the cabin pressure?"

"Sorry, sir." I checked. "Still at a third of a T-standard atmosphere, but there's a slow drop." Patrol ships kept the air pressure at a lower level, to minimize leakage and to minimize the stress on the in-ship hatches in case of combat damage. The air pressure on Mars was still half that, so the ship's pressure had never bothered me. "The hull's probably cracked somewhere." The moisture in the air wouldn't be enough to cause disaster, thank the Maker.

"Cadet Dodsthon? You all right back there?"

"Nothing but a few bruises, sir."

I pressed the control on my helmet. The air hissed out and I undid the straps and pulled it off. Beside me I could see Commander Mylls doing the same. The cabin air smelled stale, and I could scent a hint of burnt plastic. I stretched, and then realized that the cabin was slanted forward, and tilted about thirty degrees downwards to the right.

"A good landing considering, sir," I said.

"You know what they say: any landing you can walk away from...."

I checked the navigation systems. "Commander, I show us only a

hundred kilometers from our target point." I pulled up a map and had the computer mark on it our destination and our estimated position. It was a long walk, but it was along the canal Mattiq had spotted which we were only a few clicks from. "We just have to walk along the canal."

"Very good. It shouldn't be too hard."

I hit the appropriate controls and printed strips that contained maps of the local area and where we had to go. After that I shut off my board – the reek of burnt plastic was getting stronger.

"Sir, I recommend shutting down your board, too. I can smell something burning, and it's getting worse."

"Good thought, Cadet." He flicked off his board and dimmed the lights.

I heard Mattiq walking towards us from behind.

"So Mattiq," I asked, "what do you think of Mars so far?" Turning my head I saw him rubbing the back of his skull. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, it's just a bump. You know, Kyros, I don't think Mars likes me."

I snickered and Commander Mylls guffawed. "Chin up, Cadet. The sand outside looks plenty soft."

Mattiq winced. "Sand in my tail. Great. Just wonderful."

Trying to ignore my herdmate, I turned my head to the Commander. "Sir, you'll have to get out first. I'm going to have to push your seat aside to stand up."

"Do you need any help?"

More favouritism. "No, sir, I'll manage."

He got out, unlocked his seat, and pushed it sideways the short distance it would go. "Kyros, what do we need?"

Grabbing the handle overhead, I pulled my body up and around, slowly sliding off and feeling for the floor with my booted hooves. "We need water, lots of it. And the oxygen masks. The air out there isn't really thick enough for either of you. If I remember right, there're sandshoes in the survival kits somewhere. We'll need those, at least until we get closer to the canal." I got my hooves under me and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Cadet Dodsthon, you start filling our containers from the ship's tanks."

"Yes, sir." Mattiq turned and went aft through the passenger compartment to the rear storage.

"Kyros, why do we need all that water? The canal isn't far and it'll have lots. They all do, don't they?"

"Commander.... Sir, they do, but we can't get it."

"Huh? But—"

"Sir, the equator is the driest part of Mars, it's why we live at the poles. It's a little cooler, but there's water. At the equator, other than inside the canals, it's dry as a bone."

"So?"

"The canals keep water because there's a layer on their surface. The Martians claim it's a life form. If you break its surface without the right chemicals to neutralize its reaction, it exudes a thick, sticky sealant. The stuff is tough, unbelievably tough. If the jeep had hit the canal, the stuff would have grabbed on and ripped us apart."

"Oh."

"The plants guard their moisture just as well. They store it inside their roots, which go deep into the soil."

"Commander!" Mattiq called out. "There's only a hundred and eighty litres in the tanks. There's gotta be a leak somewhere."

"Great Maker!" I screamed.

"What is it?" the Commander asked.

"We have to get out, sir, now! Mattiq, fill the containers as quickly as you can, use all the taps. Be fast! Sir, grab the emergency rations, jackets for the night, oxygen masks for the two of you, and the rest of the survival gear."

"But—" he began.

"Now! I'll help Mattiq. We have to get out of here!" I shoved the fresh maps into Commander Mylls' stunned hand as I pushed my way past. The passenger compartment was empty and undamaged except for a few seats hanging at weird angles from their rails. Further back I saw Mattiq standing over one container. He didn't know, how could he know? Other empty containers were on the floor nearby.

I stopped, ripped open a first aid kit and ripped out the knife inside. I just hoped it'd work. Turning, I galloped back, shoved past Mattiq....

"Hey! What you doing, you crazy 'taur?"

I skidded to a stop, and punched the knife into plastic composite near the bottom of the main tank. It cracked, but didn't break, and I shoved the knife at it again and again. Water began dribbling out and I grabbed a container, shoved it under the waterflow, and then shoved the knife in and pried the crack further open, twisting the knife to scrape a hole. Water began gurgling out and I kept making the hole bigger, stopping before it grew wide enough to splash around the nozzle of the container.

"Mattiq, we don't have time!" I handed him the knife and pointed further along the tank. "Punch a hole there."

“But—”

“Do it or we’re all dead!”

He took the knife, grabbed a container, pushed past me and started punching another hole.

I heard hoofs and turned my head and saw Commander Mylls with three packs bulging with equipment.

“Kyros, what are you doing?”

I turned back to watch the water. I couldn’t miss a drop. “Sir, once the water seeps into the sand beneath us, it’ll get to the waterseeker seeds. This place is bone dry! The seeds’ll burst into growth and rip this jeep apart because they’ll sense the water. They’ll rip *us* apart if they catch us!”

“You’ve got to be—”

“I’m not, sir. Grab extra rations, grab a blaster for each of us, and don’t forget those sandshoes. It’ll be—”

With my other eye I saw that Mattiq had punched a hole which he was making larger. Water dribbled out, most of it missing the container.

“Mattiq! Watch your container – you can’t let *any* water onto the floor! *None!*”

He jerked around and looked at me. He must have seen the barely controlled panic in my eyes as he dropped the knife which thunked on the floor and moved the nozzle of the third container directly under the stream. Forward I could hear the Commander moving around.

The jeep creaked, loudly, and settled a little deeper into the sand. I glanced at the containers; two were half-full, Mattiq’s was a third. Water was still dribbling out, and when we left it’d go on the floor and eventually into the sand.

“Commander! Do you have everything?”

The ship groaned again.

“We’re out of time, I’ll meet you at the airlock – have a mask ready for Mattiq!”

I looked around for something to plug the leak, but there wasn’t anything handy. I should have grabbed the bandages....

“Mattiq! I’ll watch that – there’s an open first aid kit forward, grab the bandage. Run!”

He moved past me, careful not to bump the containers. I grabbed his and tried to hold it under the dribbling water and winced at each drop that slid onto the floor.

Another groan, loud, deep, longer this time. The tilt of the ship grew larger.

"Mattiq!"

Then he was beside me, handing me a roll of gauze. I grabbed it and yanked a bunch off the roll and shoved it into the hole I'd made.

"Seal the other one!"

"Already there, Kyros."

Turning my head a bit I could see that he was. After wiping off the top of the container with it, I stuffed in almost all the gauze I'd tore off in the hole and the leak stopped. I could see the material dampening and watched a drip form on the lowest point on the bandage. Tearing my eyes away from it, I sealed the container. Reaching over I turned off the tap Mattiq had been using at first and sealed that container.

"Ready!" Mattiq called. "But it won't last long."

"It should last long enough." I hoped.

Grabbing the two containers, I lifted them and trotted forward, there wasn't room to gallop. I could hear Mattiq behind me, could scent the water, could scent the acid tinge of his fear.

The airlocks were in the middle of the passenger compartment, one on either side of the ship. Commander Mylls was at the one pointing upward, the other was probably buried in sand.

"Put your mask on, pass me Mattiq's!" I screamed, panic tinting my voice as I dropped the water containers onto the deck.

The ship groaned again, and I heard the sound of tearing metal.

I grabbed the mask the Commander was offering and shoved it towards Mattiq behind me.

"Get it on! You too Commander!"

I realized that Commander Mylls already had his on and saw that he was holding out one for me.

"I don't—"

"Put it on Cadet! You've been away for years, don't risk it! That's an order!"

The sense of his words sunk into my brain and I grabbed the mask and settled it over my head, strapping it down and pressing the button to inflate it snugly over my head. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Mattiq had his on too.

"Override the lock, sir! We don't have time to equalize the pressure!"

"Shouldn't we put on the sand—"

"There's no time! Open the hatch and run! We'll put them on when we have some distance!"

The Commander nodded, pressed the override, and pulled the lever.

Hydraulics pushed both hatches open and air roared out. The ship groaned again. The sound was quieter but only due to the lower air pressure.

“Run!”

The Commander ran up the sloping deck and leapt out, one backpack in either hand and a third on his back. I grabbed the two water containers and hurried after him, thankful for the rubber soles on my boots that gave me some grip on the deck. I could faintly hear Mattiq behind me.

Leaping out I flew through the air for a moment falling gently until I landed on the sand and sunk deep into it. Mattiq landed almost on top of me.

“Run!” I screamed, forcing myself upright and pressing my legs deeper into the dry fine equatorial sand.

I could see the Commander staggering through the sand that was up to his knees. I staggered after him. Mattiq’s feet were so big that he almost walked on top. He grabbed one of the containers from me and I just let go, working to move through the fine, fine bone-dry dust. My breath panted in the mask as I staggered forward, one step after the other. I heard metal tearing behind me and forced myself not to look back. Mattiq was far in front, helping the Commander. We were climbing a rise, probably a dune. My lungs heaved and, its compressor overwhelmed, the mask dispensed oxygen from its tanks. Though my head was spinning, I forced myself to concentrate. I pulled one leg out, pushed it through the sand, and shoved it down into the depths. A second leg. A third.... Mattiq appeared beside me, grabbed my arm and pulled me. I could feel—

Great Maker! I stopped dead, panting for breath. Sweat was on my flanks and I didn’t dare move. A Patrol uniform was designed to allow sweat to pass through for cooling for when it doubled as an emergency space suit. The sweat shouldn’t be enough to set off the seeds, but I couldn’t take the chance.

“I don’t believe it,” I heard the Commander whisper.

I turned at my waist and twisted my head and looked at the last moments of the *Trilethones* as the waterseekers slowly engulfed it. It wasn’t like a bad tri-vee, the plants moved just enough for the naked eye to see and that was enough. Vines curled around the hull, clinging, prying. There were hundreds of them engulfing it. I heard a loud moan, a spark as the coil discharged, the tearing of metal. The plants slowly grew, slowly moved, and the *Trilethones* disintegrated beneath them.

I was still looking when I felt somebody touch me. Turning I saw that it was Mattiq.

“Hey Horsie, put these on.” He was carrying two pairs of sandshoes and was wearing his own pair. “Now don’t you wish you had big wide feet like mine?” I could see him grinning through his mask as I took the shoes from his hands.

“At least I won’t have to carry all the sand you have in your tail everywhere.” At that Mattiq turned his head and moved his tail so that the tip was almost touching his mask.

I ignored him and, knowing that my sweat had frozen and sublimated in the bone-dry air, slowly rolled onto my side, pulling my legs out of the sand. I grabbed two of the sandshoes. In their collapsed form they were three tough, parallel carbon-fibre posts in a clump. The longer two pulled out and the third was hinged perpendicularly to one of the long posts and clicked to the other as a spacer. Woven between the posts was an extremely strong carbon-fibre mesh that spread out as the two outside poles were moved apart. Any of the land based member sentients of the United Planets could use them. After I strapped the first pair onto my right two hooves, I shook each leg to make sure its shoe was secure. Then I rolled over onto my other side to strap the other two shoes to my left hooves. Rolling onto my backs, I wiggled the end of my lower back a bit to scratch the itch that dried sweat always gave me, even through the Cadet uniform, and then rolled forcibly back and struggled to get my legs under my body prior to standing. Mattiq leaned down and helped me upright.

By then the Commander had also walked up to me, he too had a pair of sandshoes on. I looked up into his masked face.

“What were those things, Kyros?” He was pointing towards what remained of the jeep.

“We call them waterseekers, sir. Their seeds are everywhere through the deserts. They wait, passive, until there’s some water and then they burst into life, grabbing all the water they can, and growing as large as they can. The water they don’t immediately need, they store deep inside their roots. When all the water is absorbed, their growth slows and they slowly bloom. After a few weeks or a month, and after pollination by windborne pollen, they build up reservoirs of pressurized oxygen and then fire their seeds into the sky like rockets. The seeds can land kilometers away. When that’s done, they die.”

The Commander nodded. “There’s a little bit in the hypnotape on them. It concentrates on ways to get oxygen out.”

“I’m not surprised, sir. They only grow in deserts around the equator, and are rare everywhere else. When we migrated, we colts played a game of urinating to watch them fight over it.”



"I've never seen anything grow that fast!" Mattiq burst out.

"Nobody's figured out how they do it. The seeds are fairly large, about the size of a melon, and are under pressure. You cut one wrong, it'll blow up in your face."

"Well," the Commander said, "we'll just have to be careful. I grabbed backpacks for each of us, and all the straps I could find. We should be able to arrange something over your lower back. Each of us will take one pack and you'll take the water."

"Sir," I said, "My load should be balanced. There should be enough room in the containers so that we can empty one into the two others and discard it."

"Really carefully, and we'd better leave the container shut when we discard it," Mattiq said.

"Well then, I'll help get the straps worked out for you and Cadet Dodsthon can sort—"

"Sir, I think it'd be better if Mattiq helps me with the straps. We've done this a couple of times before. It'll go much faster."

He frowned. "Good point Kyros. I'll be at the top of this rise with the packs. Cadet Dodsthon, take it slowly and carefully, we're not in a rush here."

"Sir?" Mattiq burst out. "The *Triplex* will help us, won't they? They have to know where we are. They could tell others on the planet where to send a plane."

I sighed. "Mattiq, there are no planes that can reach us. The herds have a few, but right now it's summer in the north and the herds are at least seventeen thousand clicks away. They have nothing with that range."

"But the Martians...?"

"The Martians could have done it centuries ago, but now they don't seem to be able to do anything other than fade away."

"Cadet Dodsthon, we'll be fine. We have lots of supplies and rations, and we don't have far to go. The Martians can supply us with food and water, and they do have radio contact with the Patrol. We'll be fine."

"I hope so, sir."

The Commander turned and walked up the rise, his sandshod hooves only sinking a few inches into the sand. He was awkward, but he'd soon get used to them. Everybody did.

Mattiq got to work on the straps and, although they were thin and we had to buckle several together, we got something that would work. The straps were thin enough that on Terra they would have dug into my flesh and opened wounds, but on Mars they'd be workable.

As I helped Mattiq empty the least full of the three containers into the other two, he asked, "The Commander is acting strange, isn't he?"

"Well—"

"Kyros, think about it!" he hissed. "He's formal with me, and informal with you. Before today did he ever call you by your first name? Ever?"

"Maybe he's just shook up over the crash. Or maybe he knows that I'm the most critical of all three of us for my knowledge. He might be trying to put me at ease."

"I don't think so."

A more significant and horrifying thought crossed my mind as we sealed the one container, sealed the other and moved it over to the third. "Mattiq, how much water do you think we have here?"

"I don't know... forty litres, maybe?"

"That's kind of what I thought. We've got to go a hundred kilometres. I figure we can do twenty kilometres a day, maybe less. You and the Commander need four litres per day, while I need six. Do the math."

"Great. And I thought this would be a nice easy hike."

"I hope the Commander grabbed the survival kits, and I hope they had desert equipment. We're going to have to recycle our urine and I'd prefer to filter it first."

"Oh, definitely! The last thing I want to drink is 'taur piss!"

He laughed as we finished draining the container, but it was a forced laugh and it choked off when the Commander walked back to us. He was wearing a thin jacket, but it was good even for arctic temperatures and would adjust automatically to maintain the wearer's body temperature. On his back was the largest backpack, and a blaster was holstered at his belt. He was holding two more packs, one in each hand.

"Here you go, Cadets. Let's get going. Given the plantlife we've seen, there's a blaster for each of you inside. There's also one canteen in each and it's full. If you need to piss let me know – I've got the recycler."

"Oh, joy," Mattiq muttered.

He handed the smaller pack to me. "There's an inertial compass in there. You should lead."

"Understood, sir."

"I figure we've got about six hours of sunlight left. We should make for the canal, then march west towards the Martian city we were aiming for. See how far we can get before nightfall."

Mattiq and I nodded. I pulled out the jacket in my pack and put it on over my upper half, checked that the charge on the blaster was full – it was – and clipped the holstered blaster to my waist belt. The backpack went over my

upper back as the two of them checked the caps on all three of the water containers and secured the two with water to my back with more straps, and left the third one sitting in the sand. Mattiq clipped his blaster to his belt and put his pack on his back and we were ready to go.

Then we started walking with me leading. I wanted to take the mask off; the sweat on my face was making it itch. But the Commander wouldn't let me. I went slow as I was a little wobbly on my hooves. Commander Mylls followed, and Mattiq brought up the rear. The inertial compass both recorded the distance and direction we traveled, and had a magnetic compass pointing to the Martian north. The march was slow and it gave me far too much time to think. I'd become the *de facto* leader. I knew I didn't really want it. I was afraid I didn't deserve it. Yet, I was the only native....

The land was silent, cold, and stark. There were dunes all around us, and we could see faint whirls of sand in the slight wind. Here and there in the sand were the dried out dead husks of waterseekers. In the distance we could make out the dim shapes of rock outcroppings.

We marched slowly, even in Mars' T-standard one-third gee, as they weren't used to moving in the sandshoes. It was still a few hours before sunset when we reached the plant growth that bordered the canal. This far out there was only scattered canal cabbage, great monstrous carpets of leaves that lay along the ground. They gained their name because at sunset they'd curl up to preserve their warmth and water overnight, and go into a semihibernation state to minimize their oxygen usage. Further in I could see oxyweed loaded with the small round balls of their fruit.

Calling a halt, I asked, "Sir, I'm going to go closer to the canal, if that's acceptable. I need to show you a couple of things. And you, too, Mattiq. In case something happens to me. Just wait here. Unless...?"

"No, Kyros, we need to see. Frankly, I'm still feeling my way through the survival hypnotape."

After taking off my packs just in case, I carefully walked around the outstretched leaves towards the nearest oxyweed. As I went I called out descriptions of the plantlife. "Make sure not to step on these big leaves – they're canal cabbage. They'll curl up around you and they're much stronger than they look. If you get trapped inside one, you might break the odd bone, but you won't be crushed. In that case, make sure to turn on a flashlight or you'll suffocate." Hypnotapes filled your mind with facts, but they were a disorganized, meaningless pile of data. By telling them I'd help their minds reorganize the stuff they'd been taught.

It wasn't long until I reached an oxyweed: a small plant with a thick stalk, dark blue-green in colour. Small leaves stuck out and underneath

each was a cluster of one or two fruit. "This is an oxyweed, and it can keep you alive." I plucked three fruits and carefully turned and made my way back. "Make sure to harvest it by the stem; don't pierce the skin of the fruit. They're actually reservoirs – they're where the plants store the oxygen they make during the day. They use that oxygen to help them breathe at night. You can't survive on it, but on top of the oxygen in the atmosphere, it can be just enough."

I wanted to take my mask off but I had orders, and its reservoir was only good enough for inflating and sealing it two or three times. Instead I pulled off a glove, held one fruit up against the victuals lock on the mask, pressed my fingernail into the fruit, and shoved it against the lock as oxygen started hissing out. It was cold and stunk of onion and mud, but it was breathable enough.

I tossed one fruit to each of them. "You want to press it up against the lock of the mask just before you pierce it with a fingernail or knife. Make a small hole and apply pressure gradually. When it starts hissing, shove it against the lock."

I watched as they tried it. Mattiq popped his and had to wipe the green goo off his mask, but the Commander got it right. "It stinks," he said. "You're sure it's safe?"

"Absolutely. The stench is a defense mechanism against the wildlife. It's harmless though."

"Animals?" Mattiq burst out.

"Nothing dangerous, Nutty. Mostly small rodents which live in burrows along the canals and live off the plants. They eat the oxyweed anyway, so it's not much of a defence."

I put the pack on my upper back, and Mattiq and the Commander secured the straps and water to my lower back. Then I led the way westward, skirting the edge of the green zone alongside the canal. There wasn't much conversation. Occasionally Mattiq would grumble about the headache he'd developed. My mind kept wandering, but it was always the same thing. Should I be here? But I was the native guide. Should I just go home? The tanks in the mask hissed as they added more oxygen to supplement what I was breathing.

The Commander had to drag me out of my thoughts to set camp. Mattiq helped him set up the tents whilst I went out to cut firewood from a clump of dead waterseekers. I moved off at a ground-eating low-gravity gallop. Learning to do it in sandshoes had taken me years, but then the same applied to the rest of my herd. I quickly reached the stalks, but it took me a while to chop through them, and eventually I had all I could carry which

was a lot more than you'd expect given the low gravity. Lifting it all in my arms I trotted back to the camp. There we made kindling and got a small slow fire burning. It might've been difficult in the low oxygen, but the Commander's blaster on minimal setting made it seem easy. He offered us rations. Mattiq didn't think he could keep anything down, but I took my share. We drew lots for watches and I won. It was easy to stay awake because of the annoying rasp of my breath in the mask. I just watched the stars, identified the moving lights of the two radio satellites in geosynchronous orbit, traced the constellations – the Centaur, the Rabbit, the Hungry Wolf – and tried to comprehend the immense distance to the stars. Every so often I turned on the flashlight that'd been in the Commander's pack and shined it around. Time passed until my watch beeped and I trotted back and shook Mattiq's shoulder.

"Mattiq, your turn to watch."

"Wha— Oh, my aching head."

"The pills didn't help you?"

"If anything, it's gotten worse."

"Well it's your watch, Nutty. Your pain will help keep you awake."

"Hah!"

"If it isn't gone by morning, we'll have to try and figure out what happened. Did you bump your head in the crash?"

"Nope."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Hey—"

"Helmet off Mattiq."

He released the pressure and pulled it off, gasping for oxygen in the thin air. Every cadet received basic first aid training, and head traumas were high on the list of causes of headaches. I carefully examined his head, looking for any signs of a wound or trauma, any bump, any bruising. Nothing.

"Guess you're telling the truth Nutty."

He put his helmet back on and the air hissed as it inflated itself to fit. "Told you so... but thanks. I could have been wrong."

"You should be fine in the morning."

"I hope so, Horsie. Have a good rest."

"Thanks."

And with that Mattiq strapped on his sandshoes and walked closer to the fire and sat down and watched.

I also moved closer to the fire, locked my legs, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep.

I couldn't. Each inhale rasped as the compressors worked, and each

exhale hissed through the valves. I don't know how long I stood there listening to myself breathe. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. Pressing the release to let the air hiss out, I undid the straps and lifted the mask off, dropping it onto the sand. Closing my eyes, I inhaled.

Dryness filled my nostrils, a whiff of Mattiq, smoke from the fire, and below it all was what I could only consider a scent of time, immense time and age. I inhaled the thin air, and held it. Great Maker but I'd missed being home! Was the Patrol worth the sacrifice? I exhaled with a relaxed sigh. I wasn't worried; centaurs had evolved to live on a few plateaus high above the surface of Terra, in the thin cold air. Our nostrils trapped the moisture and the heat to preserve it. We were the only member race of the United Planets who could live on Mars – other than the Martians, of course, who had welcomed us. And we'd welcomed the offer because we were made for the vast plains, even though we'd been driven from them on Terra thousands of years ago.

"You know, Horsie, Commander Mylls is going to have a fit when I wake him for his watch. You heard his orders."

I opened my eyes. "Nutty, it was a choice between this and sleeping. I have enough trouble with the mask in our cabin and only the strong herd scent makes it work. Besides, if I fall over you can wake me up and put my mask back on."

He snickered and went back to where he'd been sitting as I closed my eyes. I breathed faster than I had with the mask, but also relaxed faster. An odd contradiction, but the faster breathing was how I'd breathed the majority of my life. Closing my eyes I fell into a gentle sleep, surrounded by the comforting odour of my herdmate.

SOMETHING WAS WRONG. I woke up, blinking my eyes in the dry, cold air. There was a dim glow from the fire, but no other light. What had awakened me? Something drew my eyes down and I saw Mattiq lying in the sand, still. His falling over must have done it! I leapt over to him and collapsed down onto my lower chest and felt his throat.

Nothing.

I felt his wrist.

Nothing.

*By the Maker!*

I think I screamed; I'm not sure. I ripped his mask off and started breathing into his mouth, thumping his chest, and then breathing into his mouth again. Nothing, nothing!

I heard Commander Mylls' voice in my ears, shouting. "It's too late! He's dead! He's dead!"

My face shook as I choked back tears and sobs.

My herdmate was dead.

Dead.

Slowly I clambered to my hooves and turned to look at the Commander. He'd save us, he'd save Nutty. Somehow.

"Kyros, what happened? Why is your mask off?"

I swallowed and then licked my lips. My mouth was dry. I looked up at him and tried to speak. "I..."

"Kyros, you're not in trouble. Tell me what happened."

"I..." I kicked the sand. "I couldn't sleep with it, sir."

He sighed. "And Mattiq?"

"I... I don't know, sir. I awoke him for his watch and he told me he still had his headache. He sat here by the fire and I went to sleep. I heard something, woke up, and saw him lying on the ground. There was no pulse. I... I... tried..." My body started to shake.

"Kyros, it's all right. You did what you could."

"But it wasn't enough! He's dead! My herdmate is dead! And I let him die!"

"Kyros! It wasn't your fault!" He gently moved past me and leaned down to Mattiq's prone form and grabbed his mask where I'd thrown it. Turning it over he looked inside. "The tank pressure's fine..."

I forced myself to think. "What could have happened, sir?"

"I..." He stood up and walked over to his pack and rooted around. He brought out a gas sensor, unclipped the oxygen tank on Mattiq's mask, and inserted the tank to the sensor. It beeped and flashed red.

I stepped forward. "What is it, sir?"

"It's..." He stood up and turned to me. "The tank was filled with carbon monoxide."

"Carbon..."

"It must have caused his headache. He probably didn't even know. He kept breathing it as the mask added more and more of it to supplement the oxygen it got from the atmosphere, getting more and more into his blood, until finally he suffocated. You said he was sitting?"

"Yes, but—"

"He must have died and not fallen over until the wind blew him."

I closed my eyes, blinking back tears.

In the pre-dawn light Commander Mylls walked over to his pack and

crouched down. Reaching in he pulled out a clip of spare tanks and started testing them one by one. I walked up beside him. Almost half the tanks were good, but the rest.... Each registered as carbon monoxide. Pressing the release on his mask he pulled it off, popped out the reserve tank, put one of the confirmed oxygen ones in, and put the mask back on and breathed heavily to catch his breath. Testing the canister he'd taken out, it was confirmed as oxygen.

I couldn't speak.

He stood up and walked over to where I'd dropped my mask, picked it up, and tested its canister too. Oxygen.

Eighteen tanks – of which nine were useless, filled with deadly carbon monoxide. Every mask other than Mattiq's had been charged with oxygen.

My mask.

The one I could have handed to Mattiq on the jeep.

Closing my eyes, I swallowed, and wobbled back and forth on my legs until the Commander steadied me.

I'd killed him. I'd killed my herdmate. I—

"Cadet Imbreos!"

The command in his voice made me turn and look at him.

"Kyros, it's done. It's—"

"Why? Great Maker, *why*?"

"Kyros, I don't know. But it's not your fault. It was—"

"It *was* my fault! I could have given him the mask I was wearing, I could have tested the oxygen, I could—"

"Kyros, you couldn't have known. None of us could have."

I looked up, his face dark in the sun rising behind him.

"Kyros, it was an accident. I wish... but we didn't have time. If we'd stayed on the *Trilethones* to check, we'd have been killed. You saved us. *You!*"

"I—"

"Kyros, we need to get going. We—"

I stared at him and pursed my lips. "Sir, I am not leaving until we bury him. Properly. As he deserves."

"We can't—"

"Sir. I.... It's the best we can do. And I *will* do it."

I stared up at him, challenging him, until he finally turned away. He walked over to his pack and pulled out a shovel, unfolded it and handed it to me. Then he watched as I dug the hole, carefully lifted and carried Mattiq's body into it, and covered it back up with sand.

He just stood there watching, the sun rising higher, as I violently shoved



the shovel into the sand as a marker. Bowing my head, I remembered Mattiq. I remembered the good times, the bad times.

"Kyros, there's... there's something I should tell you."

I spun around and stared at him in anger and sorrow. "What?"

"Kyros, he wasn't your friend."

"What?"

"He was ordered to be your friend by the Commandant on the *Anthera*. He never liked you."

"I don't believe you!"

"Kyros, remember when I told you that the Patrol had been careful to make things possible for you, but to not show favouritism?"

"Yes...?"

"Cadet Dodsthon was part of that. We knew you needed a close companion to stay sane. When you and he ended up sharing quarters, he was ordered to be your companion. It was explained why and he grudgingly agreed."

"He... *grudgingly*?"

"That's what his report said."

"But..."

"Kyros, we need to get going. He's buried and you... well, you were right. He at least deserved that. But if we stay here, we'll join him. Cadet Dodsthon wouldn't want that."

"I...." My voice fell into silence and I looked at the grave. In a few hours the scent of the water in his body would seep down to the waterseeker seeds. They'd grow, and they'd consume him, and from that they'd make new life. I looked down, remembering. "Sir.... Commander, are you sure?"

"It was in the report."

"I'm sorry sir, I don't, I *can't* believe you. He was a friend. More than a friend. His... his soul.... Sir, his was the most... centaur...." I couldn't go on.

"Kyros, I'm sorry. It wasn't. He was doing what he was ordered to do. Nothing more."

I wiped tears out of my eyes. The Commander had to be wrong. He *had* to be.

"We need to get going."

"I.... Yes, sir, I guess.... You're right, sir." Turning away I helped the Commander gather up the supplies and we took what we could from the pack Mattiq wore. Most of it could be fit in mine, and I lingered over some of the items, inhaling his faint nutty scent.

He'd been my friend. My herdmate. I couldn't believe....

The Commander and I both used the recycler and divided the reclaimed water between his canteen and mine, and I clipped mine to my belt opposite my blaster. I lugged on my pack and the Commander lifted the water containers onto my lower back and then motioned for me to lead.

I turned away leaving my herdmate behind me.

As I started walking, a part of my mind whispered, *But what if he was just following orders?*

THE COMMANDER AND I WALKED QUIETLY. He tried to start a conversation once or twice but I ignored him, my thoughts sad and confused. We walked all that day, and all the next. We were able to pick up our pace as the Commander learned to walk efficiently with the sandshoes. Based on the map and the inertial compass, we'd probably make it to our planned landing point late tomorrow if we were lucky, but more likely early the day after.

That whole time my mind kept going over the same things. The scramble to get out of the jeep. Mattiq's headache that I belittled, his death, the Commander's statement. Over and over again. I thought back over our time together. Meeting Mattiq at the museum on Terra, going over the Bumps for his first exposure to free fall, taking the rocket up to *Anthera*, becoming roommates, shuffling assignments so that we both shipped out on the *Triplex*...

On the second day I remembered when Mattiq was called to the Commandant. He'd changed when he came back. Or was that me creating a false memory to support what Commander Mylls had told me? The more I remembered, the more my memories became jumbled, and the less sense I had of what was true and false.

And the more I lost track of what Mattiq had meant to me, the more I decided that I wasn't ready to be a Patrolsentient. If the Patrol had to order somebody to be my friend lest I go insane, then I was not psychologically capable of being a Patrolsentient.

I had first watch on the third night and was standing by the fire. Closer to the canal, the cabbages had folded up into great balls. There was no movement; the small rodents generally stayed in their burrows as it cooled down after dusk. Again I was looking up at the constellations, the so very distant stars, when I saw a flash.

I galloped over and shook the Commander awake and pointed upward. We watched in silence as there was a second explosion, flashes of light, and a third explosion. After that there was only the stars.

"Commander, sir, was that what I think it was?"

He paused before responding. "Somebody was fighting somebody up there, Kyros."

"The *Triplex*, sir?"

"They were certainly involved."

"Who won?"

He snorted, the sound clipped through his mask. "I don't know."

I looked up into the darkness. Was the *Triplex* destroyed? Was everybody I knew up there dead? Were all my holos of Mattiq destroyed? By the Maker, he'd been my friend! I knew he had! And yet....

"Kyros, go to sleep. I'll keep watch."

I shook my head to clear it of the confusion. "Thank you, sir." Moving a bit closer to the fire, I closed my eyes and nodded off, my head full of jumbled memories.

*KYROS, JUST REMEMBER THAT I'M YOUR FRIEND. Nobody told me to do anything, nobody had to give me orders.*

I jerked awake, dawn still a ways off, though a bit of brightness could be seen over the horizon. The Commander was walking between the canal cabbages; I could see the bobbing of his flashlight.

My memory was sharp and crystal clear. I heard Mattiq's voice in hydroponics. He hadn't wanted to tell me about his meeting with the Commander. Mattiq must have known what would happen if he did. What did happen when Commander Mylls did. And he'd told me that he was my friend, no matter what. And that nobody had to give him orders.

I'd been right and the Commander had been wrong! Well, not exactly, but he knew only the official record, not what Mattiq and I had really had.

Tears glimmered in my eyes as I closed them fell into dreams of the good times Mattiq and I had shared.

THE COMMANDER NUDGED ME AWAKE in the early dawn, his scent full of impatience – and that odd overtone. We did our business with the recycler, put on our packs, loaded the remaining water on my back, and started on our way. I'd been so deep in mourning that I hadn't been fully awake in days. It wasn't until we were skipping through the desert beside the canal that I did *fully* wake up, my sorrow manageable.

And that was when I solved the puzzle: the Commander and I, and Mattiq, were all the victims of a saboteur. There was no other possibility.

The explosion on the *Trilethones*, the failure of the second engine and the radio, the sabotage of the oxygen canisters for the masks. There was no way that could all have been an accident. No way!

I stopped. "Sir?"

"Yes, Kyros?"

*Who could have done it?*

Commander Mylls had selected the masks. He'd piloted the jeep. He'd had the access hatch open under the port engine—

"Kyros?"

*It can't be Commander Mylls. It can't! And yet....*

I looked at him, at his eyes and snout through the mask. The gray hide, the bare flesh around his mouth. The big eyes. He'd been acting strangely on the ship and ever since we landed....

*No! I refused to believe it. And yet—*

"What is it, Kyros?"

I pushed my panicked thoughts back. If Commander Mylls were the saboteur.... I swallowed. "Nothing, sir. I, err, thought I saw something. It was nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm.... Yes, sir."

"How much longer do you think it'll take?"

I looked the inertial compass and compared it to the map and did some quick calculations. "Sir, if we maintain our current rate of travel, we should get there tomorrow."

"Good job, Cadet."

"You're welcome, sir."

He turned away and I accelerated into a ground-eating canter, the fastest speed the Commander could reach.

If the Commander was the traitor, then why was I still alive? It didn't make sense, but the clues suggesting the Commander was the saboteur were too convincing. Or were they? If the Commander had sabotaged the *Trilethones*, then he had willingly put his own life in grave danger, and that didn't make sense. Unless he thought he could land in the canal? That'd been his plan until I'd told him not to. That was when he'd panicked.... But the risk!

Nothing made sense about any of this.

My mind wandered, all the pieces crashing off each other. His attitude, his smell, the events.... I just couldn't believe it. And yet it seemed more and more likely. Aboard the *Triplex*, he'd told me that it was a Patrolsient's right to refuse to obey an order. Did the same not hold

true if the Patrolsentient in question had broken Patrol law? I remembered back to the *Anthera*. There'd been some discussion of the same thing, and yes, it was the individual Patrolsentient's duty to stop others and uphold the law. Even if the other was a fellow Patrolsentient.

And yet.... I couldn't believe that the Commander could have done it! I just couldn't.

That night we again set camp. I had second watch, so I tried to sleep while the Commander stood sentinel. I couldn't. If the Commander were a traitor, I dared not. I think I nodded off eventually for a bit but then the Commander shook me awake for my watch and went to bed.

I couldn't stand still so I wandered back and forth by the fire, my sand-shoes making a soft hiss which each step. Then I stopped as a horrible thought novaed into my mind.

If the Commander were a traitor and the saboteur, then did my blaster actually work? I pulled it out and confirmed that the charge still read full. And yet.... The Commander had always used his blaster to start the fire, I'd never used mine, nor had Mattiq. I moved a distance away from the camp, switched my blaster to its minimum setting and fired at the ground.

Nothing.

My throat was suddenly dry.

I switched my blaster to its maximum charge and fired.

Still nothing.

Commander Mylls had to be the traitor! And yet, I still doubted. And I couldn't shoot him as he slept!

I trotted back to the fire, lay down beside my pack and pulled out the toolkit that was part of the standard equipment. Holding it under one arm so that it illuminated what I was doing, I removed the power cell and then unscrewed the access panel to scan for obvious faults. It didn't take long to discover that the charge metre, which still read full, was simply wired directly to a microbattery. As to the sabotage to the actual blaster, it was so simple I almost laughed: the fuse had been removed! The fuse wasn't needed for arming or anything, but was a safety measure, given that the power cell had more than enough stored energy to make a fair-sized bomb. You really didn't want your gun to blow you to bits when you fired it. I took a fuse from the kit's spares and slipped it in, sealed the case, and re-inserted the power cell. Setting the blaster to its minimum setting I stumbled up to my hooves, walked away from the camp, and fired at the ground.

This time it worked.

Setting it to maximum, I holstered my blaster, and went back to stand on watch, feeling at least somewhat more confident. And more horrified.

If the Commander was the traitor, *what was I going to do about it?* He was sleeping.... I could kill him.... I couldn't kill him!

When the sun was rising across the horizon I still hadn't decided. The only thing I had decided was to keep my speculations to myself.

Together we quickly took the camp down and went on our way at a quick pace. It wasn't long until the Commander called out, "Look!"

Glancing back I saw his outstretched arm, and following it I could just make out the glistening green glass of a Martian city. "That could be it, sir."

We continued on our way and it wasn't long until the hive was clearly visible. It was a large one, and unlike most it was not abandoned. Every surface glistened in the sunlight. No dust or dirt could be seen. Sentries stood at the entrances, their tall insectoidal forms still. Dim shapes could be seen moving behind the glass.

I stopped, and the Commander stopped beside me. I'd visited hundreds of hives, most abandoned, a few not, and they always affected me the same way. Martian hives are old. Inconceivably, monumentally old. Standing in one you realize how tiny your life is, how short a stretch within the immensities of history. A Martian hive has seen everything, done everything, and you can feel its jealousy of your youth.

Commander Mylls stopped only a second, and then he marched on and I wrenched myself free of the spell and hurried after him.

The sentries watched us as we walked up to the green glass pathway. After taking off our sandshoes and putting them in our packs, we walked along the pathway between the plants beside the canal, and then over the canal via a curved bridge of thin green glass that looked far too weak to hold us. Glancing to the left I could see another canal branching off beside the hive. Even with my boots on, I could hear the ring of my hooves on the glass, and feel the bridge shake just a little.

The Commander stopped and looked around nervously.

"Sir," I whispered. "It won't break. Ever. Not even in an abandoned city."

"Oh...."

We walked the rest of the way across and up the pathway to the nearest entrance. The towers grew higher overhead and the sunlight reflected off them and bathed us in a pale green. Our hooves tinked against the glass and the sound echoed and bounced from tower to tower.

"Commander, let me go first. I know their customs," I whispered.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Kyros."

He stopped and I walked past him, held my hands up before me empty,

made my way up the ramp, and stopped at the entrance before the guards. They were warriors, different from the nobles. Each had six legs and their bodies were covered in heavy chitinous plates that were dark green with mottled patches of lighter green. Each held a long bladed weapon, a staff with a long curved axe on top, but I knew that it was also an energy weapon. The pair never moved as I approached, but I knew they were watching me through the glittering black orbs which served as their eyes.

I stopped and bowed before the left one, the senior one due to his position. He returned my bow and gently touched my forehead with his antenna. We both unbowed.

<This soft guest comes at the request of thy queen. I serve the Queen of Queens of the Guardians of Peace,> I hissed and clicked in the pidgin Martian that had been developed since the early days of first contact.

The Martian cocked its head, and then responded, <The Queen of Queens hath been expecting ye. Follow, I will take ye to her.>

Queen of Queens? The Martian ruler was *here*? Thank the Maker the Martians hadn't taken offence! <Thy service will be rewarded.>

Again we bowed, he touched his antenna to my forehead, and then we unbowed. Turning, he started walking into the hive and I followed. I heard Commander Mylls' hooves tinkling on the glass behind me and then a loud hiss, and a crackle of electricity. Stopping, I spun around.

The other guard had lowered his weapon and was aiming it straight at the Commander's chest and he was reaching for his blaster.

"Commander! Stop!"

He stopped and looked at me, the other Martian remained motionless.

<Why doth the Queen of Queens dishonour my Queen of Queen's servant?>

<That one is with ye?> the Martian I'd been following asked.

"Commander, stay very still." Then I said, <He is my Queen.>

<He is not of the Guardians of Peace.>

Huh? Maybe I'd mispronounced something. I tried again, slower: <But he is my Queen.>

<He is not of the Guardians of Peace.>

I looked at the Commander. I couldn't believe it, but I had evidence, and the Martians somehow knew. "Sir, the Martians are saying that you're not a member of the Patrol."

"Of course I am, Kyros! Tell them that!"

I looked at him and shivered. I could feel myself sweating, I could smell his fear, I could smell my fear. How could Commander Mylls be a

traitor? He'd been in the Patrol for almost thirty years! It simply wasn't possible. And yet....

"Sir. I tried to tell them. They... they won't listen."

"Tell them!"

I looked from Commander Mills to the Martian who'd been guiding me, and then back. "Sir, Commander, why did you kill Mattiq?"

"Kill Mattiq? It was an accident!"

"Was it, sir? Was the sabotage to the *Trilethones* an accident?" I struggled to hold back tears.

He stared at me.

"You killed my herdmate!"

"Kyros, I.... Kyros, it had to be done."

"What?"

"The Patrol is dangerous. They have total power and no counterbalancing force. One day somebody will decide to use the bombs to take control, and there will be no Dahlquist to stop him."

I stared at him.

"The Martians have translated the Cruinni Stone. What if it's a weapon? A drive? If we can get that information out to the Triads they can become equal to the Patrol, a countervailing force!"

"The Triads...." I whispered.

"Kyros, listen."

"Why?"

"Kyros, do you remember what I told you? About the bombs? The Patrol controls them all. What if the Patrol goes bad, Kyros? What happens then? Who'll be able to stop it?"

I could barely make him out through the tears in my eyes. He'd killed Mattiq.

"Cadet Imbreos!"

My reaction was instinctive. "Sir?"

"Do you remember your Doubt course? The Patrol consists only of mortal sentients. What if enough go bad to take over? What'll happen then?"

I licked my lips and swallowed and sniffed. The Martians smelled the same as they ever did, but Command Mylls' scent was getting angry and frustrated.

"Kyros, the Patrol needs to be counterbalanced. There has to be a second power that can react if the Patrol goes bad. We can't risk not having one!"

"Sir... Commander... how can you believe that? How could you kill Mattiq?"



"Mattiq was only your friend because he was ordered to be, Kyros."

I heard Mattiq's voice in my mind as though he was standing beside me. Maybe his soul was. *Kyros, just remember that I'm your friend. Nobody told me to do anything, nobody had to give me orders.*

"Kyros, I'm your real friend. My body is like yours, my soul is like yours. Help me, come with me. I have a ship waiting."

A ship.... Great Maker! "One of the ships destroyed the *Triplex*! It killed everybody aboard her!"

"It had to be done. I'm sorry. Kyros, help me get what the Martians have, help me take it, and we'll keep the Sol System safe for a thousand years! Come with me Kyros, we need more sentients like you!"

I clenched my fists and closed my eyes. My herdmate was dead and this... this... *Ultravore* was asking me to betray everything! To betray my herd, to betray the United Planets, and to betray everything the Patrol stood for!

"Sir... I can't...."

His voice turned gentle, "Kyros, it's the only way."

"Sir... Commander...." I swallowed and blinked back tears, forced the memories of Mattiq back because I knew I needed a clear head. The Patrol was depending on me. "No...."

"Cadet Kyros! I order you to come with me!"

I sucked in air through my nostrils and snorted. "Sir.... No. I can't. What gives you the right to order me? I... I am a Patrolsentient!"

"On your head be it." Before I could react, before the Martians could react, his blaster was in his hands and there was a burst of light and a hiss of energy, and the other Martian at the gate was dead, his chest blown into dust.

Before I had time to think, I was drawing my blaster and galloping to interpose my body between the Commander and the Martian who was beside me. Commander Mylls was aiming for me. My training kept my hand steady. I could smell his confidence and arrogance and that filled my scent with anger. Mattiq had just been a *tool* for him! He saw that I was aiming my pistol at him and a smile crossed his face. He didn't know! A zephyr of dust spun between us, but his smile made it easier for me to aim and I fired, the charged particles hissing through the air. I saw Commander Mylls go down just as I felt a burning pain in my upper chest. Everything went blurry and then darkness consumed me.

I WOKE UP INSIDE A BRIGHTLY LIT ROOM. All around me was yellow-tinged green, the floor, the walls, the ceiling. There was no source of illumination, no sound, no hum, no crackle. The floor and the ceiling was smooth, but

the walls rippled. No, that's not right. Their surface was folded in what might have been designs, but there was no logic to them. It was not art, but it was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Not even in the ruined hives I'd explored.

Looking around I realized that other than myself the room was empty. And I was clean and neatly groomed. My tail hung straight and smooth, and my Cadet's uniform was a pure pearly white. None of the dust and grime from almost a week spent in it could be seen. Even my blaster was still on my belt.

"Hello?"

I heard the sliding of feet and the rustle of cloth in the distance, and then a Martian appeared in the room. She was not like the Martians at the entrance, not one of the warriors. Her flesh was soft and dark green in colour. She had no antennae, but instead a ring of thick soft spikes, almost like a crown, around the top of her forehead. Her solid black eyes were sharply tilted, and her smooth hands ended in long fingers tipped with long claws. She was clothed, wearing a pale green headdress and a flowing dress of the same colour that left her chest bare.

<Our Queen of Queens is glad that ye have recovered.>

Recovered. I remembered Commander Mylls, the blaster shot.... <I was dead!>

<The Queen of Queens told us to heal ye.>

Great Maker! <Ye mean ye have the power of life and death?>

<No, not that. We cannot revive thy friend Mattiq. There hath been too much time. Ye we reached in time. Now follow, our Queen of Queens wishes to speak to ye.>

<I....> My voice paused and then I bowed and the noble bowed with me. We both unbowed and she turned and led the way and I followed.

One instant I was still in the room, then the world wavered, and then I was in a passageway. I followed her, my booted hooves tinkling on the glass floor in a sound loud and harsh in the silence. The only sound the noble made was the hiss of her bare feet and the rustle of her dress. We passed others who stood aside and bowed. We rose higher and higher, and suddenly the dim light changed to bright sunlight tinted jade through the glass; I realized we were in one of the central towers. The passage curved sharply to the left and angled more steeply upward and I could do nothing but follow. Through the glass I could see the city spreading out below. We climbed higher and higher, and as I saw more and more of the city I realized that we must be in *the* central tower, the nest of the Queen of Queens.

The smooth walls became rippled, and soon they had the same kind of texturing that had been on the walls of the room I'd awoken in.

Abruptly the ramp ended and the two of us stood in a room.

It was dark, far darker than the ramp in the tower. The walls were no longer translucent, but were embossed in what looked like dark red panels. Light glistened over everything, and I looked up and saw that the domed roof was transparent and clear, and I could see a few wispy clouds high in the sky. At the far end of the room was a massive chair made of what looked to be some kind of dark wood covered in deep red cushions. How old was that throne? Trees had not grown on Mars in millennia! And on the throne was the Martian Queen of Queens.

She was far paler than the noble who'd led me, and dressed all in gold. A gilt headdress draped from her head between the tall rows of spikes at the front and rear. Gloves – if that were the right word – of the same material covered each arm, from the elbow to the wrist. Her hands, like the noble's, were bare, but they were hard and wrinkled and I wasn't sure she could even bend them. From her waist down was a voluminous dress of the same golden material, that draped over the chair and spilled onto the floor. Around her neck was a fine filigreed necklace which supported three gems in a column. The topmost was a deep purple, the second purple-blue, and the third green. Like the noble, her chest was bare.

And in her arms she held a naked form like none I had ever seen.

The noble had already prostrated herself and I lowered my lower body onto my lower chest and bowed my upper body forward until my upper chest was also touching the floor.

The Queen of Queens clicked and hissed something in the pure Martian tongue. The noble stood up, turned, and left in a rustle of cloth and hiss of feet.

<Ye may rise, Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars.>

I slowly and carefully stood up, or as slowly and carefully as a quadruped can. <Queen of Queens, ye honour me.>

<Be thee easy, Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars. Thee hath honoured the Guardians of Peace with thy deeds.>

<I... I thank ye, Queen of Queens.>

<Approach, Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars.>

Slowly I walked forward, the sound of my hooves echoing from the walls. I stopped in front of her.

<Take our gift to the Queen of Queens of the Guardians of Peace.>

She leaned forward and the creature cradled in her arms turned its head

and looked at me. The figure was naked, completely, no hair anywhere except for a pale brown tuft on top of its head. <Take this child, Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars.>

Carefully, hesitantly, I reached out and gently lifted the creature from the Queen of Queen's arms. It weighed almost nothing, but its scent was rich. It smelled like a fresh spring day; it smelled like hope; it smelled like dreams; it smelled like my mother smelled when she licked the afterbirth off of me. Gentle I cradled it in my arms. It was warm and soft. Then it cooed like a bird, and stuck its thumb in its mouth.

<Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars, thee hold the meaning of the Cruinni Stone. The writing is not technology or a weapon, but the genetic code of this being. It was made by the last humans, to preserve a legacy of what they hath been.>

<What, what is this?>

<Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars, thee knows that all of the races come from a single root, a *Terran* root. Even the Venusians, even us. We were the first to be made, and we remember. The being thee holds is of the race of humans, the race that created us all in their wisdom and their arrogance, just as they made Mars and Venus into the image of their own world of Terra.>

Great Maker! I looked at the creature. Was it one of the Makers?

<They were not divinities, but as mortal as thee or I. They made us stronger than they were, tougher, more adaptable. They made us servants, workers, slaves. But, in the end they destroyed themselves, leaving us to find our own way. We of Mars remember where all else have forgotten.>

<Wha.... What do I do with it?>

<Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars, thee are young to ask such questions. This human, this man, is just a baby. Take him to the Queen of Queens, raise him in the traditions and honour of the Patrol.>

<But—>

<He is not as his race once were. We changed him so that he could survive in the blasted worlds they left behind. He can survive on Mars, he can survive on Venus, and he can survive on Terra. Take him, raise him. The Patrol has kept the peace for over a hundred years and we believe it is time for this gift.>

I looked down and the human looked up and smiled, a smile that filled its face with a golden radiance.

<Go now, Kyros of the Centaurus of Mars. Thy Captain awaits thy return.>

Captain Yancey? But....

<Go, child.>

I nodded my head, afraid to bow due to the gift I was holding, and the noble who'd led me here was beside me. <Follow.> She turned, and I followed her. Back down the ramp, back through the winding corridors of the Martian hive now empty, and finally back to the entrance I'd come in by. There was no sign of Commander Mylls' body, but standing there was Captain Yancey in a breathing mask and beside him the small form of Lieutenant Brunn.

"Cadet Imbreos. Where are Commander Mylls and Cadet Dodsthon?" the Captain asked.

"Sir. I...." I blinked back tears. My herdmate was dead. Commander Mylls was dead at my hand. Mattiq.... "Sir, I'm not sure how to exp—"

"We know Commander Mylls had been compromised."

Huh? "Sir? You do, sir?"

"After you left, we were attacked by another Triad vessel. We captured it, and their computers told us all kinds of things. It seems that Commander Mylls was a deep cover agent – the personality we knew was a synthetic overlay. The real personality was released when the first ship transmitted that tone."

"I'm glad to know you survived, sir. I was afraid...."

"It's done." He pointed at the child. "So *that's* what we came here for."

"Yes, sir."

"Hmph. All this over a bald kit. A bald kit in the form of those that made us." The Captain looked away for a moment, cleared his throat, and then turned back to me. "Cadet, where are Commander Mylls and Cadet Dodsthon?"

I looked away, and then down at the human child. His face radiated hope and dreams, and from it I drew the strength I needed. "Sir, Commander Mylls is dead. I shot him after he killed a Martian. Mat...." I gulped; the next bit was going to be hard, very, very hard. "Ca—" *Mattiq.... Mattiq, my best friend and herdmate. "Cadet Dodsthon is dead also, due to a breathing mask I believe Commander Mylls sabotaged." I'll never forget you. Mattiq.*

The Captain's voice turned tender and he paused before continuing. "Cadet.... I can't comprehend what Mattiq meant to you, but... if you want, I can drop you off with your herd. Give you time to heal. To... think about your life. Give you time to remember Mattiq as he deserves to be remembered. The Patrol will be here whenever you're ready."

"Sir.... I...." I caroled my thoughts as the human child grabbed my chin

in his warm soft hand. Looking at him, I suddenly knew my proper place, what I wanted to do with my life. "Captain Yancey, I'd prefer to return to the *Triplex*."

The captain peered into my eyes intently. "Are you quite certain, Kyros?"

"Sir... yes, sir, I am. Do you remember when you asked me why I wanted to be a Patrolsentient?"

He nodded.

"I want to be a Patrolsentient because I *can* be a Patrolsentient. Because somebody has to, and I believe and hope that I can live up to the honour and requirements of the position. Somebody has to do it, sir, and it is my responsibility to civilization to do it if I am proven able." Besides, I knew deep down in my heart, where the Truth lay darkest and heaviest in every centaur, it was my duty to Mattiq.

The Captain nodded. "Come along then, Cadet. After we return to the *Triplex*, I want a full report on what happened. Take your time with it; I need all the details. And I want you to care for this... gift. And bring it to my cabin once it's settled."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The Captain turned away. Lieutenant Brunn and I followed after. The human child giggled as Lieutenant Brunn's long thin tail danced before him.

Anger pierced my sorrow. After all I'd done, the Captain just dismissed it? But then it hit me, and a warm glow pierced the sorrow, enhancing and echoing it and helping me begin to heal. The Captain hadn't commented on the job I did. He'd not complemented it; in fact, he'd just tossed it off.

He hadn't made anything of it because he hadn't expected anything less than what I'd done.

He hadn't expected anything less. Because in his mind, and now in mine, I *was* a Patrolsentient.

## THE REALITY

“YOU’RE *REAL*,” SHE WHISPERED—

He blinked, nostrils quivering, ears flicking, forcing down the urge, the *burning need* to run. All around him were scents: the harsh grit of unwashed bodies, the pungent cloying stickiness of makeup and paint and glue and plastic foam, the acid-sweet miasma of thousands and thousands of omnivorous humans all around. His tail crawled between his legs; he could feel its tightness pressing against his shorts that itched and pulled. Hot sweaty cloth that whiffed of *horse*, giving him enough support to pull himself together.

A crowd had gathered as he fought to hold tight to the minimal control he had. Just like he’d clung to the cliff, even as the very rock rattled and shook and cracked around him—

Bad memory!

“Well—” He licked his lips to buy time. Even the fursuiters were ignored as the crowd thickened. “I’m as real, as real as can be.” His own ancient, nearly forgotten memories of fursuiting made him crouch a bit lower, to the girl’s level, offer her open arms, turn his head and embrace her, resting his muzzle on her shoulder.

“Real—”

“AND NOW, LET ME PRESENT our guest of honour, Alexander Rory.”

The tail wearing human turned and backed off the stage and the crowd clapped and cheered as the light bay anthropomorphic horse thudded his way across to the podium, his rubber horseshoes squeaking every third step.

“Thank you—”

He waited for the cheering to die down.

“Fursuits, costumes, they all do the same. They try to create a new reality where none existed before. Whether as personal expression, to share joy, or simply because it’s their job, the wearers *know* that the disbelief must be buried in the immediacy of presence. Of action. Of dreams and fun and silliness and games. I’d been like that. Had probably always been like that, even before I knew what it was.

“Unlike what a lot of you may claim, I wasn’t afraid of my humanity. The humanity I’ve given away so easily, so desperately.”

His tail whipped back and forth, its glorious flowing motion making the fursuiters drool in envy. The living, breathing horse on stage was oblivious.

“Oh, it’s all in the conbook. Rock climbing, earthquake, the endless plummet, complete paralyzation. Years of proving my brain still lived. And then a glimmer of hope. Experimental tech. Brain transplants, new bodies, anti-human-cloning laws, and a hand offered to help me up.

“But you, you all dream of what I have. Wrong souls in wrong bodies, fantasies, dreams, hopes. A shared love that brings you all here together.

“And that invited me here to tell you of the *reality*.

“You who fursuit know a price. The hours of practice, of stumbling around, hitting chairs, dripping with sweat, nearly fainting. I was there, I did it. For me because of a childlike wondrous curiosity. Teaching myself how to sew, to glue, to create a dream from fake fur and foam and resin.

“That was *easy*. Why? Because when it’s all over, you can go back to your hotel room, take it off, clean off the makeup, shower off the sweat and stink of exhaustion.

“At least I *hope* you showered.”

A bit of laughter wandered through the packed room.

“But, for me—

“Oh, there’s the obvious. The stares, though it was widely enough broadcast over my fifteen minutes that people generally don’t run screaming. But, there are the *looks*. The glances when they don’t think you can see them—”

He motioned to his eyes. “Though, with these, you can *always* see them.

“It’s the stares, the silent disapproval – sure, the extra space on subways and buses is nice, until day after day, month after month, year after year, it just goes on and on and on. *That’s* when the price begins to sink in.

“From here, people go out in tails, in full costumes – but you go out in



herds, packs. Safety in numbers. Security. A sense of ridiculing the norms, of being silly and fun for a day, a weekend. And then, *then* it all comes off and you blur back into humanity. Anonymous, safe.

"I came here, and you all envy me. But – it's me who envies *you*. I love furry! I always have. It's what made me choose what to become.

"I look down at you. Back at all of this. You're cowards, all of you. Cowards doing it only when it's safe. Cowards, secure in the certainty that in a few days you can safely go back into hiding. Cowards shutting out the world so you can be what you think is yourselves in safety. No news cameras, no reports. A castle of dreams under terrified siege.

"I was just as terrified, just as much a coward, as you all are. Calling my fursuit a costume. Telling the border I was going to an SF con, not a furry one. Hiding the truth from family, friends, co-workers—

"You're all looking at me. The dream has shattered. Oh, don't try to deny it, I can *smell* it. When I was like you, I'd have reacted exactly the same. I don't know why I'm surprised—

"And yet—

"And yet, how many of you *always* wear a tail, ears? How many of you go grocery shopping in your fursuit? Take the bus to work wearing hooves? Other than Halloween, other than in a defensive pack, how many of you *really* go out amongst the norms? Alone – unable to hide—"

He stopped, sucked in a breath of air, wiped tears from his shining eyes.

"I'm sorry.... You asked me here expecting a speech, a presentation, on what it means to live the dream. Or, maybe some personal reflections on the pain of the operation, of waking up and seeing the world for the first time through the eyes of horse, sniffing the sweet air through the nostrils equine.

"And yes, I was going to give you that. But—

"But, as I stood up here, looking down at your expectant faces – it was – The pain, the *envy*. They almost shattered my soul. I look down from here and I hate you. I *loathe* you. A blinding anger that you can go home and take it all off. *Envy* that you can live without the endless hidden stares, the whispers, the hidden truth of our *apologetic* society.

"I lay awake, ear pressed against the worn pillow, tail tangled under the covers, lamp turned to dimness, abandoned book on the floor.

"And the only sound I hear is the sobs wracking my body. The desperate pain for what I'd had—

"Or, sometimes, in my darkest hours, I wish I was still the paraplegic. Then it was easy. I couldn't see the looks, couldn't hear the whispers—"

He sighed. "I'm— I'm sorry."

Turning, the horse fled, rubber-shod hooves squeaking loud on the wood behind the podium, his untouched glass of water abandoned.

HE SAT IN THE LOUNGE, colloquially named *The Zoo*, in the back corner, watching. Laptop ignored, word processor page blank.

Staring at the convention around him.

Word had gotten around. Nobody talked to him. Nobody wanted to touch him, to touch the *reality*.

He stared across the unconscious space everybody left around him, hunger dripping out of his wide eyes. A desperate, greedy, needing, *envious* hunger.

Staring—

"Mr Rory? Mr *Rory*...?"

The horse looked up, tearing his eyes from the gulf between himself and the life he envied. Sighing, loud and long, he cocked his muzzle to look at the neat bearded gentleman addressing him. "You don't want it, I've killed and damned—"

"Mr Rory, that's not it."

The horse eyes blinked.

"I was at your presentation—"

His voice was dark and cold. "I did a great job, didn't I?"

"Sir, you told them the truth. They needed to hear it for their own good. Would you rather have been selfish and lie to them?"

"I—" Turning away, he tried not to look at the hordes on the far side of the chasm. "Yeah. A part of – no, a *lot* of me wishes I had."

"Mr Rory, there are too few truly good people in this world. I'm proud to have met you, and thank you. In the long run, you've made the world a better place by letting them know the actual cost. They really did need the truth."

"But—"

"Give society time. Change is never easy. And... God bless." The man got up. "After all, nothing is more hated than the truth." Then he walked off, long felt rattail gliding behind.

The horse watched the man vanish into the crowd. Even long after he was gone, he just looked. Staring.

## CHRISTMAS DREAMS

SHE RAN INTO THE ALLEY, hair streaming in the cold and blowing snow. Her face would have been wet with tears except that they'd frozen in the bitter weather. Only when she reached the far back corner where no one would ever find her did she stop, sobbing.

She knew that now mommy was happy. Her lips quivered. She had to be brave. She couldn't let herself go back. Her mommy and the men her mommy brought home always fought over her. Some beat mommy instead of her, and she wanted so badly for mommy to be happy.

She knew that with herself gone, mommy would be happy. Mommy had said so over and over again. Mommy wouldn't have to scream or tear out mommy's hair anymore. Over and over again mommy had said that it was never mommy's fault, it was always her fault.

Now mommy would be happy.

The snow fell thicker, the wind blew harder and harder as the temperature fell. She had on only a thin dress and worn sandals and torn tights. Her hair was dirty and greasy but still the wind fought for it, yanking at it, whipping it around.

She curled in on herself, trying to ignore the cold biting into her. Shivers wracked her body, but she was used to them. She'd always been cold in the dark corner she slept in. The corner with the dripping water and the cracked window through which the wind always howled.

It wouldn't be long now, she knew. It wouldn't be long and then she'd be gone and mommy would be happy forever and ever.

Closing her eyes, blinking back the tears that froze beneath them, she knew she had to be brave. She had to be brave just a little longer. Mommy

had told her that she was worthless, always afraid, no good. She'd show mommy.

Her lips quivered.

She'd show mommy that she would never be in the way again.

Somewhere in the distance the wind knocked over a garbage can and it rolled and rattled across the pavement before banging and clattering into a wall.

She wasn't as cold. She didn't need to shiver anymore. She was growing warm and that meant that she was doing the right thing. The right thing to help mommy.

SHE DIDN'T SEE THE TWO FIGURES, if figures they were, move towards her through the wind. If she had, she might have wondered how the wind seemed to blow through them. The two were indistinct, more shadow and potential than actuality. They left no foot prints, and they made no sound. They stopped in front of her and may have moved, it was hard to tell. A limb stretched out and something small and flat and round was held just above her forehead.

"SUZY – WAKE UP—"

It'd been a dream. She'd chickened out again. Mommy was right.

Blinking her eyes open, she squinted through the blowing snow. And then her eyes shot upward, wide as wide can be.

"Suzy, do you want to come with me? I can't stay long. It's Christmas, I have presents to deliver."

It was Santa Claus!

Her eyes drunk down the rich red hat and coat, the white edging that seemed to blur into the blowing snow, and the shiny black boots. In the distance she could see a reindeer looking at her. He looked so warm. She seemed to fall into its eyes.

She was cold, very very cold, but she no longer needed to shiver. She never wanted to be cold again. Never!

"Are you coming Suzy?"

She'd forgotten all about Santa! Santa, who wanted her to come with him. Her! But she'd been so bad! Mommy had always said so.

Santa held out his gloved hand and slowly, like a wild bird that wanted to eat the seed from a boy's hand but was afraid, placed her hand in his.

His hand was big, gentle through the soft felt glove, and warm. So very warm. Her hand burned from his touch.

Gently he wrapped his hand around hers and carefully he helped her to

her feet. The wind howled. It seemed distant somehow, not a part of her. She looked up into Santa's twinkling eyes and he smiled at her, his white teeth showing through the billowing white beard.

She realized that if she went with Santa she would never trouble her mommy again. Never!

And she'd be with Santa! On Christmas Eve!

"Can I really go with you?" she asked.

"Of course, Suzy. It's why I stopped here."

"But I've been a very bad girl. Mommy said so."

"You, a bad girl?" He laughed, his stomach jiggling like a bowl full of jelly. "Nonsense!"

"But—"

"I'm here, aren't I? I've come to take you to the North Pole to live with me. Far away from your mother. She'll never bother you again."

"But it was all my—"

"Nonsense! Now come along, little one. I have to hurry."

And with that Santa lifted her up, cradled her in one arm and touched his nose with his other. The world blurred and then they were both in the sleigh with the seemingly endless presents piled high behind them in a bright green sack. He lowered her down and wrapped her snugly in a thick fur blanket and she felt warm all over, except in her heart. Her heart was cold and she didn't know why. She'd never been warm, the house had always been cold, the window had always been broken. Mommy had said that it was her fault.

She snuggled into the blanket and looked up at Santa and smiled and he smiled back. Then he flicked the reins which slapped against the reindeer and with a lurch the sleigh moved. It rattled and groaned for a moment, and then it angled steeply upward and all was silent except for the tinkling of the bells on the reindeer pulling them.

Making sure not to lose her balance – mommy always said she was so clumsy – Suzy slid across the furred seat to the edge and looked over and down at the world spread far below.

It was aglow with light, twinkling with happiness and joy.

A small smile crept onto her lips hiding the chill that still gripped her heart.

The sleigh tilted and Santa grabbed her in his large warm hands and held her as the sleigh descended and then alighted on a roof. One runner was deep in the snow which creaked and groaned, the other hung in space so that the sleigh remained level. One of the reindeer turned and looked back at her, its antlers massive and heavy. It winked.

That was when she realized that Santa was gone, and with him had gone some of the presents. And then he was back beside her, the reins in his hands.

"That takes care of Phil and Stephen. They've been good little boys."

And with that he again flicked the reins and the sled slid forward, the snow crackling under the runner, and again they were moving upward into the silence. Another short trip and then they landed again. Santa vanished and return and they slid forward.

Again and again and again.

Sometimes the time in the air was long, sometimes short, but Suzy wanted it to last forever. When Santa was gone she watched the reindeer. They were warm. Their breaths didn't mist in the cold crisp air like hers did. She wanted to be like them! Helping others, not being clumsy, not being the problem, and always been warm. She wanted to fly with them, fly beside them, and pull Santa on his merry way.

She lost track of the number of stops they'd made. The night seemed endless, far longer than it should have been. She began to yawn, tried to hide it but Santa noticed and looked at her. She flinched, expecting him to beat her like mommy always did but instead he just smiled.

"It's a long night and we have far to go," he said. "Sleep, little one. Sleep the night away."

And with that his warm soft hands reached under the blanket he'd draped over her and she felt him pull a belt over her to strap her in, like her daddy had done before he left her and mommy. Santa strapped her in like she'd seen in the commercials on the televisions behind the shop window. When he was done he gently kissed her on her forehead, his lips warm and soft. She felt sleep take her as the sleigh flew into the air. Sleep and warmth and maybe a little joy... except for the chill at the core of her heart.

THE TWO INDISTINCT FIGURES WATCHED as the girl grew colder and colder, paused longer and longer between breaths.

THE NEXT THING SUZY KNEW was Santa shaking her awake. With tiny fists she rubbed her eyes and looked around.

All around was snow, glistening in the moonlight. Here and there small and neat wooden buildings could be seen, many with dark smoke drifting out of tall chimneys. Figures were all around, small, unhooking the reindeer, pulling out the empty green sack. Above the sky shimmered in blues and greens and pale reds that curled and twisted across the distant heavens, barely visible beneath the bright moon.

But Suzy had eyes only for the reindeer. The warm, happy, cared-for reindeer.

"Wake up, little Suzy. We're home."

She looked around more, her eyes growing wider and wider. She was really here! If only it wasn't a dream.

"That's right, little one. My workshop at the North Pole."

She was cozy beneath the blanket, and when Santa reached under to undo the belt, icy coldness followed his hands in. Suzy couldn't help but shiver. Santa wrapped her in the blanket and lifted her up and cradled her in his arms like her father used to.

"Let's get you inside and warm. The elves will make some clothes for you and—"

Twisting her head, she turned and watched as the last of the reindeer was led away by one of the elves, the breath of the elf misting in the cold just like her and Santa's.

She twisted, struggled. She would *not* be a burden. Not to her mommy and not to Santa! "No!" she shouted, her voice loud in her ears.

Santa stopped. The elves stopped. The reindeer, the same one who had winked at her, stopped and twisted its long neck to look at her out of one eye.

"You can't stay out here," Santa said.

She wiggled her hand out from beneath the tangled blanket and pointed at the reindeer that was watching her. "He can stay out here."

Santa turned and laughed, and as he laughed she bounced up and down and she couldn't help but smile.

"Suzy, he's a reindeer and you're a little girl and—"

"I want to be a reindeer! I want to be warm forever and ever!"

Santa looked about to frown, but then looked at her with a quirky smile.

"Are you sure, Suzy? A reindeer's life isn't easy."

Clenching her fist she answered, "Yes!"

"You won't be human any more, Suzy. You won't have hands. You'll never go to school and you'll never learn about the wonders of the world and—"

"But I'll be warm and I'll fly!"

"Suzy, flying is very hard. Even if you can be changed, only a very few ever learn to fly."

She started wiggling to get out of his grasp. "I'm going to fly and I'm going to pull your sleigh and help you. I'll never be a burden! Never!"

Gently Santa let her down until she was standing on the cold arctic snow. There was a thin layer of powder on top of a solid surface of packed

snow and ice. The warmth of her skin melted the snow and she felt the frigid water squeeze between her toes and between her foot and the sandal. Each of her breaths poured out in a thick mist that billowed around her head before drifting away.

"Suzy, are you sure you want this?"

She looked at the reindeer who lowered its head and scratched at the snow with its hooves. Somehow she knew it was smiling at her, beckoning her.

"Make me a reindeer, Santa. Please, oh please! I don't ever want to be a burden on you! Never!"

"Suzy, I'm – I'm sorry, but I can't."

The coldness in Suzy's heart burst into her body, freezing the hope she'd so briefly had. For a golden moment she had known that she would never be a burden on anybody again. That she would never be cold again. But now she would, and soon Santa would yell and scream at her and it'd be the same as with mommy.

She looked down at the snow, turning away from the reindeer. Her body shook, not with cold, but with sadness and lost hope.

Gently Santa grasped her chin and slowly moved her face until her eyes were looking into his. His eyes were old, old and full of pain and happiness and horror and joy but overwhelmingly with kindness. He looked at her and Suzy couldn't look away.

"Suzy, little Suzy, my world is a land of magic and dreams. You can become a reindeer, but only if you really really want to. I can't do it though. You have to do it."

"Me?"

"You have to wish it, wish it with all your heart and soul and mind. You have to wish it and want it without regrets, without fear. And if you do that then your wish will be granted."

"I—"

"Suzy, it has to be you. I wish I could, but I can't. It has to be you."

She looked around and over at the reindeer who flicked its ears and cocked its head, beckoning.

"Santa, what do I do?"

He sighed and, after tucking the furred blanket around her shoulders, turned away. As though to the world and not to her he said, "You have to wish it. You have to will it to happen with every fibre of your being. You have to want it and you have to have no regrets."

The reindeer took a step forward and looked at her and she looked at him, her eyes drowning in the blackness of his eyes.



“You have to need it to happen so badly that my world has no choice but to make it happen.”

Suzy looked at the reindeer and the reindeer looked at her. Her mind fell deep into his gaze, deeper and deeper. Deep into his calm acceptance of the world, deep into his warmth and self-sufficiency. Suzy began to live his life, from the day he was born into the cold spring knowing only his mother, to his first steps, to his first swallow of milk. Time passed faster, she grew with him, alongside him, she his sister, he her brother. Her fur grew, thick and fine and insulating. Her legs grew hooves, wide hooves with whiffs of hair to sense the snow, strong hooves to move and stretch and walk on the surface instead of sinking into the depths. Her hands that her mommy had cursed as hopeless clenched and tightened and formed into two more hooves, each matching her others. Together she and the reindeer learned to run, to bound, to canter, to gallop. Side by side they ate and she felt gentle grains and green shoots crunching under her teeth. She felt the ripple of muscles in her chest and the rising sensation of blobs of food back up and into her mouth to be chewed again. She felt antlers grow upon her head, starting as small buds and then getting bigger and bigger and heavier and heavier. Together she and her brother grumbled about the itch of the velvet, and together they shared the relief as it was scraped off in bloody scraps. Side by side they sniffed the air, walked and ran and lived.

Deep inside her the coldness that was still wrapped around her heart fought back, calling her away from her dreams, back to reality. But she ignored it, pushed it back, fled further and further into the eyes of the reindeer, into the life they shared. She pushed the cold away and sought the warmth and simplicity of being a reindeer. With him she remembered the soft shush of the elves brushing their hides as they stood side by side. The gentle pressure at the base of her antlers as the elves rubbed and polished each tine. Standing side by side they chewed cud as the elves draped them in the heavy leather harness, the weight odd and unfamiliar, the bells sweet in their ears.

And when Santa asked, not commanded but asked, they leaned forward and began to move faster and faster, the sleigh sliding behind them. All of them, her brother, the other reindeer, all taking faster and faster steps and pulling the sleigh and the toys behind them. In front of her she watched as first the lead pair and then the next and then the next leapt into the air and kept going, trotting forward, yet standing on nothing.

And when it was their turn, she and her brother, they leapt upward and trotted on the sloping ground that was really air, curling the magic

of Christmas around themselves and underfoot and beside and above to cocoon the sleigh and pull it and its gifts into the air behind them.

Something tore inside her, ripping away from her heart, a faint coldness that faded and was lost in the warmth of her hope and dreams. She opened her eyes, for the first time really feeling the weight of her antlers, really sensing the snow beneath her hooves. In front of her she could see the pale brown of her muzzle, the quivering of her nostrils as she breathed in and out without any clouds of mist. Twisting her long neck she turned and looked at her brother standing there beside the elves, two of them holding the leather harness that still smelled of his sweat.

Taking a step forward she looked up at the heavens, up at the shimmering ribbon of light. Her brother silently moved beside her and his breath rustled the thick fur around her neck. He was urging her on. He knew she could do it.

She took a step forward, and then another. New muscles flowed and she walked in a new and wondrous way. She moved faster, trotting now, and then bounding and leaping across the snow, her brother beside her. Both of them galloping for the joy of movement, for the freedom of their motion. She looked up at the ribbon of light and could see the path that beckoned.

Without losing stride she stepped up and into the air, galloping higher and higher, her brother following. Both of them running, flying, taking joy in the endless flow of motion. They were both free, happy, without obligations or burdens. Self-contained, not a burden on others.

The last of the coldness in her heart tore away as she galloped into the heavens, chasing after the glistening stars and flickering ribbon.

A TINY ROUND PLASTIC DEVICE gave a soft beep, and one figure pulled it away and gently put it in a pouch on his body. Around them the world was faded, insubstantial, an echo of a distant past they could visit only briefly and with great care.

"Are we doing the right thing?" the other figure asked. "Projecting ourselves here in the past, never touching, never changing, only taking copies of souls."

The first figure, his hand still in the pouch, gently rubbed the tiny device. "I don't know." He sighed. "I wish we could erase the horrors of the past, but we can't." Turning, he looked at the small girl, her eyes open and echoing her final dream of flight, her body cold and still and dead. The device generated ideas, enhanced dreams, but the barrier of time prevented anything else.

Finally he let go, removed his hand from the pouch and snapped the pouch shut.

“We take the lost and the dying and give them a moment of hope and joy. How can that be wrong?”

Giving no response, the other pressed a button on his belt and the two figures faded as they were recalled to their physical bodies in the distant future.



## A NIGHTMARE IN FEATHERS

### DREAMS....

Jumbled images of childhood and adulthood. Images of planning the ship, building the ship, boarding the ship. Images of the party when the ship officially passed the outermost point of the orbit of Pluto. Images of waiting for childbirth. Images of games. Images of tears and sorrow, of happiness and joy. Images of feathers and flight. Visions of shouts and accusations as his son flew around and around him in the effective freefall near the axis. Sharp nightmares of his son leaving him, leaving his family.

Sharp-edged images of his failure.

Images of decisions, plans.

Dreams of resolutions.

### I AWOKE.

Floating, my body felt stiff, tender, sore, even though the flesh was newborn, built around the existing nerves and brain. My lungs were full of heavy liquid that oozed in and out through my throat. Through a wavy surface above I could see people looming over me, remembered people. One was Dr Shiva still in his worn dirty robe. Others were new.

I just lay there, relaxed, blinking with the two pairs of eyelids I now possessed. Slight movements of my body translated into ripples on the surface that broke up the sight of those above me into cascades of color.

A faint thudding began and the surface above me began to move closer. I hated this part. I really did. Unfortunately there was no avoiding it and using implanted wetware routines that still jostled through my brain I

stretched out my newly feathered arms. Shocks of expected pain passed through me as never used muscles complained of their mistreatment.

With a heave I rotated myself around, though why'd they never grow my body face down I never understood. The first touch of air on my over-sensitive skin almost overpowered the pain in my muscles. A heave, my elbow claws scratching on the plexiglass. A tugging, something pulling on the back of my skull. A sharp pain, something hard and thin caught under my feathers moving them where they didn't want to go. Finally I was rotated around. Below me I could see through the bottom of the regrowth tank into the machinery and life support equipment that had kept me alive as my body had been dissolved and rebuilt.

Clenching my elbows close to my body, bending my much lengthened lower arm upward, I pushed my feathered self out into the air. Liquid streamed from me and dripped from my nostrils. Moist warm air embraced my virgin skin even through my layers of feathers. New inner eyelids shut as fluorocarbon flowed down my face.

And then I vomited.

Stiff and sore muscles heaved, virgin claws scratched and slid on the bottom, and fluorocarbon burst from my mouth and dribbled from my chin. I inhaled this body's first breath of air and it rattled and gurgled into my lungs. Then I heaved again forcing up more of the liquid I'd been breathing. The gills under my arms flared open and felt the light touch of air. Coughing and gagging I struggled to stay above the liquid as it was sucked away. My body shook and twisted in pain. A helping hand touched one set of gills and I screamed as a lightning stab of pain swept through me. Whipping away from the pain, I fell onto my side, feathers pushed aside and pulling at my flesh with stabs of agony. Instinctively my gills closed.

As the last of the liquid gurgled out I raspingly breathed, coughed, and breathed again. My rebirth was over.

"Are you all right?" Dr Silva asked.

My head spun around further than it once could and I glared at Dr Silva's human form. He just blinked and looked back. I swallowed. "How is my son?" I croaked.

Dr Silva turned away and one of the other techs shuffled their feet. "He is... well, the others—"

I pushed myself up, rotating my body to stand on my clawed feet that scraped and tore at the plexiglass. I stretched my wings outward, elbows locking, and instinctively shook myself. Droplets of fluorocarbon sprayed

from my new feathers. “What?” *Akio: status.* My implanted AI remained silent.

“They are dead.”

Phyre.... He had to be.... I slumped back down, my wings folding so that my elbow claws formed two more feet.

I felt the heat of Dr Silva’s hand on my arm through my feathers. “He is still alive—”

Spinning my head back around I stared at him.

“Barely alive.”

“What the hell happened? Why’d the others die? This form—”

“The form is safe. The problem is not a biological or genetic fault.”

“Then what?”

“Sheng, we do not know.”

“You don’t know? How can *you* not know?”

“Sheng, I am sorry. We are trying to find out. We even shut down our acceleration and sent our current genetic map to Ceres for a full analysis if they can sneak it by the UN censors, though we will not hear back from them for over a year. We need you to find out.”

Leaning back I balanced on my feet pulling the elbow joint of my wings off the ground. Then I twisted one arm around and began straightening the dripping feathers of my right wing with the clawed fingers of my left elbow. I tried to sigh but instead hissed as air whistled out through my changed teeth and past my pursed lips. “At least the wetware routines seem to have taken.”

“It did for the others too.”

“How’d the others die?” I started preening, using one set of elbow claws to scrape the feathers of the other wing into some kind of damp order.

He shook his head. “Starvation.”

Huh?

“It was not a biological fault with their nutrient processing, they simply refused to eat. It is like they had more important things to do.”

“That doesn’t make sense!”

“You will be happy to know that everybody agrees with you.”

*Akio: give me all the data on the failures of the Ythri-morph.* Again Akio was silent. “Dr Silva, what happened to my AI?”

“It is fine; we just disabled it to more closely monitor the growth of your new body. We also made some... modifications.”

“What?”

“Nothing that you will notice—”

I stopped preening. “What did you do to Akio?”

“We gave him an override.”

“Huh?”

“We do not know what happened to the others. There is a fear that the same thing might happen to you. Therefore, Akio can override your nervous system at the base of the brain and send his own commands to your body.”

“That’s against every law made in—”

“The captain authorized it.”

“How dare he!”

“The council agreed. Be aware that the override can only be made if, in the AI’s judgment, you are not psychologically stable, are overstressing your body and causing a potential biological failure, or are facing death in the near future. Maeve, activate Akio. And you Sheng, you come out of that tank. Let me unplug you and then I will dry you as Akio explains.” I watched as Dr Shiva ran a thumb along two corners of the tank, the DNA code in his cells triggering the nanites to break the seal. He pulled the side down into a ramp the short distance to the floor.

“Unplug me?”

“We had to run the updates to Akio through the physical link. The radio link couldn’t handle the bandwidth.” He reached over and pulled a plug from the socket in the back of my head and closed the seal over it. Annoyingly he left the feathers ruffled and disordered, more so as he unwrapped the cable from around my neck and yanked it out from under my feathers.

Letting myself fall onto my elbows, I crawled down the ramp. It felt odd walking on my elbows and newly clawed feet, odd feeling feathers swish across my back with the motion. As I moved the pain and stiffness worked their way out. Near the tank was a wooden perch and I leaned backward to stand on my feet alone. I moved my wings up and outward, stretching open my gill slits and locking my elbows so that my wings reached their full extension. Then I stroked my feathered arms strongly downward once—

—and a shock like electricity raced through me, an aliveness, and then a stab of pain from stiff muscles moving for the first time—

—and then it was gone as my feet clenched around the perch, claws digging into the artificially created wood.

New bodies were always oversensitive.

*Hello Sheng, Akio, my implanted AI, spoke in my mind with the sound*



of a long remembered and welcome voice echoing from direct impulse feed from my aural nerves. *Should I dampen your nerve signals until the sensitivity dies down?*

*You can take them down ten percent, but put them back up when I tell you,* I said to him, long practice generating the language just enough for the implanted AI to read the impulses that I sent to my vocal cords to sub-vocalize. Stretching the long toes of my legs with only slight tinges of pain, toes that now felt like stiff fingers, I worked my claws deeper into the wood which creaked alarmingly. “Dr Shiva?”

He turned back to me, taking a hot-air dryer from an assistant.

“How long until Phyre starves?”

Dr Shiva took a step over and turned on the dryer, silent except for the whoosh of hot air into my feathers which stretched apart. The blowing air made them twitch like individual hairs. I realized that I could sense messages from each, particles of information on air movement derived from the slight movements of the buds of the feathers against nerve bundles underneath.

“I do not know,” Dr Shiva finally answered. “Not long. A few days, a week at the most.”

I moved restlessly. “Then we’d better hurry.” I closed my eyes, *Akio: readout of autopsy conclusions of the deceased.*

Akio asked, *Do you want me to spare you the gruesome images?*

*You know me too well. Relate verbal summary.* Of course he did. We’d grown up together.

*Understood. Summarizing: Four individuals have undergone transformation into the Ythri form. Two are known dead, one is believed dead due to the lack of sightings within the past eight days.*

Lacking a beak, I began using the claws on my right elbow to groom the feathers along the back of my neck, ordering them from the chaos left by the cable. One claw caught the cap that sealed the socket and almost pulled it off. I’d have to be careful. It was odd; I hadn’t realized how tense I was, but the preening pulled it all out. It was satisfying, a wonderful feeling of bringing order out of chaos. I felt my body organizing itself. Maybe this was a mnemonic aid from the wetware, but it didn’t feel like it. Still, it felt natural, relaxing.

Akio continued, *Only Phyre is still active, and is currently under remote observation. He has resisted communication and capture. Humans with artificial wings or jetpacks are too clumsy to catch him.*

*Understood. Autopsy conclusions?*

*The two bodies recovered both show extreme forms of starvation and dehydration. One was badly damaged as the rotating hull slammed into its slowly drifting form, the other was recovered before collision.*

*Any signs of biological failure, drugs or chemicals, or other external sources of contamination?*

In my mind Akio sighed. *None. Nothing not natively generated by the Ythri form. Nobody has—*

“Sheng?” Dr Silva asked.

Opening both my eyelid pairs I blinked, and then focused on him. My body felt warm, dry. “You are good to go. I am going to have some high-protein food brought—”

“I’m going now!”

“Sheng—”

“My son helped develop this form, he may be *dead* because of this form!”

He sighed. “Sheng, you are going to eat. If you do not I will inform Akio that said lack constitutes an immediate danger to your health and he will take over!”

“You wouldn’t—”

“I would and I will! You know as well as I do that after a regrowth a body has to eat. And then you need to sleep—”

“Fine! I’ll eat but then I’m gone!”

“I really think you should....”

I glared at him, my tail and crest spread fully.

He surrendered. “On your head be it. However, I will send a remote with you in case of problems. This is not open for discussion! Akio will have control of it.”

“As long as it doesn’t get in my way.”

“Sheng, we need to know what happened, but we also need you. Do not let anything happen to you.”

My new form was significantly smaller than a human body and even perched I had to look up. “I will save my son.”

“Sheng—”

“He’s my son!” I was the one who introduced him to *The People of the Wind* by Poul Anderson. I’d given him the idea and I refused to let that idea kill him. Maybe the UN had the sanctity of the human form right.... No! That was why we’d left.

Dr Shiva sighed. “We need you too.”

“Fine.”

He turned and walked away and I started preening my wings. They were dry, but the blown air had disorganized them. It felt like an itch along my arms which now formed the leading edge of my wings. I'd have done it for hours if the scent of hot meat hadn't pulled me out of my reverie as a cart full was wheeled in front of me. Deftly I rotated my wings down and dug my elbow claws into the wood and lifted my legs up so that my feet, now my effective hands, could be swung over to grab a hunk of artificially grown meat. I had to bend my neck to reach the meat they held, but then I began tearing off chunks of protein with my newly pointed teeth.

The meat was good, very good, the only annoyance being the shreds of tissue and fat that dribbled down the fine feathers of my chin. Each hot slab was grasped by my teeth, torn away with a twist of my neck, and then gulped down as I raised my head upward and let gravity, or on this rotating cylinder I called home momentum, do the work of pulling it down my throat. After too much time I lowered myself back down to stand on my feet and began cleaning the scraps off my chin with a wing claw.

Damn wetware! Like a cat I shook myself and then hopped down the ten centimeters from my perch to the floor and landed on my elbow claws... and immediately collapsed in a tangle of feathers and stabs of pain.

*Sheng, Akio asked, do you wish me to deactivate the wing pain receptors?*

*No.*

Dr Silva interrupted my internal conversation: "Are you all right?"

Blinking my eyes I pushed myself upward with my elbows until I was standing on my clawed feet. I stretched my wings upward and shook them. "I think so...."

"You have exceeded the design parameters of your physiometry – the wings aren't designed for that pressure when they are bent to allow walking. You need to land on your feet."

Spinning my head around I glared at Dr Silva. "I'll keep that in mind." While watching him I quickly swept the feathers on each wing with the opposing elbow claw in sequence and straightened the feathers that had been disordered. "I'm leaving now."

"Are you sure—"

"By God, I'm sure! I will *not* waste any more time."

Dr Silva sighed. "Maeve, open the door please?"

The red-furred feline walked over and pushed the door open, holding it. If I wasn't happily married and in a rush I would have admired her more. Wincing a bit from the pain in my left elbow claw, I began walking across the floor on my elbows and feet. The floor itself was cold and uncomfortably

hard, with each movement my elbow and feet claws clicked against it and instinctively via wetware tried to dig into the unyielding surface. We reached an elevator and I let Dr Silva call it instead of summoning it through Akio. We stepped in after the door opened and before it shut, and then the elevator began to move upward as I leaned back from my walking position to my standing position of standing only on my feet. For a moment my balance shuddered before adjusting.

*Akio, I asked, what just happened?*

*Do you mean your momentary loss of balance? I monitored it through changes in your physiognomy.*

*You don't need to brag.*

*Well, based on the data from Dr Silva, I believe that as your balance is significantly more sensitive, it was confused by the Coriolis effects of the elevator's motion. The others reported the same effect and Dr Silva believes it is sensory conflict generated within the beta wetware for this bod—*

The elevator stopped causing me to bounce upward just a bit. I stretched out my wings whilst pressing down with my foot claws to keep their tips in contact. Then my momentum pushed me back against the floor. Before Dr Silva could say a word, I leaned forward in to my walking position and stepped out and onto the needle-covered floor of a pine forest. The elevator was disguised as a lightning-shattered trunk. With a gracious relief I dug my foot and elbow claws into the soft earth. The light at the axis shone dimly through the trees and a few birds twittered and whistled around the silence. Then I began my wobbly motion forward along the path with Dr Silva's soft steps behind me.

*"The remote will be waiting at the forest edge. I really think—"*

*"My son could be dead, doctor. The remote is your—"*

*"I could have Akio override you and force you to sleep—"*

Stopping, I spun my head around and stared at him and he barely stopped before walking into me. *"Don't you dare!"* Subvocalizing, I stated: *And that goes for you too Akio.*

*Understood.*

Dr Silva looked down at me. "If it was just me I would have reversed your regrowth and put an AI in this body to find out what was going on, but the Captain overruled me. You are not doing the wise thing."

*"You think an AI...? Phyre would recognize it."*

*"But—"*

*"You may understand genetics, but you have an awful lot to learn. I had too much of this crap from the UN because people like you thought it was for our own good! Fuck you all!"* Spinning my head around I tried to walk

faster but this body wasn't capable of it. I longed for the air. I could feel time running out.

Suddenly I feared I was too late.

Akio must have realized what the changes in my physical state signified as he burst in: *Sheng, he's alive. There's no evidence otherwise.*

*He'd better be, or somebody is going to pay!*

*Sheng, calm down. This anger isn't helping Phyre. If you take it too far I'll have to—*

The bright light from the axis momentarily blinded me as I finally got out from under the trees. Long grass rustled against the tip of my tail as I spread it. "Silva, you'd better pray my son is alive!" Then I spoke to Akio: *I have to save him, I have to do everything I can.*

*I know.*

People may claim that AI companions do not have human feelings, but Akio did.

*Akio, remove all pain reduction.*

He did.

Turning my head upward I looked around as I leaned backward until I was standing only on my foot claws. I extended my wings up and out, my elbows locking into the extended position. Muscles pulled my gills open and the damp air felt cold on their sensitive surfaces. Before I went into the tank I'd run through VR simulations of this, but I was still nervous. The wetware made sure that I knew which muscles to move, which feathers to extend, but it didn't contain the actual act of flight. It couldn't; too many conscious decisions were involved. Still, this body was designed for flight at one gee and the ship's rotation only simulated one-sixth gee, so there was certainly room for error. Twisting my head to each side, I memorized the location of the trees and planned my ascent so that they wouldn't get in the way. Even though I was nervous I forced it down. I stroked my wings downward—

And I was alive!

The artificial world around me brightened, the green of forest became a rainbow of different emeralds and jades, the blue of the lake a cascade of azure and sapphire scattered with pale greens and whites and other shades so that one melded into another. My entire body tingled with vivacity, each feather tugging at the air, pushing me away from where my momentum wanted me to go. The tips of my feathers just touched the grass on the ground and then I swept my wings back upward, tilting each feather to minimize their drag. The world began to fade into sadness as they reached their peak, but then it was another glorious down stroke and everything

brightened. Each down stroke started with an orgasmic pulse at each gill that then oozed throughout my body, fading to a satisfied warmth at the stroke completion. With each movement the surface of my entire body tingled, each feather an individual finger touching the air, embracing it, controlling it. Each tingle a part of a massage that warmed my body, invigorated it, touched it and held it like a mother holding her child. Another upstroke, an instant of abandonment, and then a wonderful down stroke, a pulse of pleasure, and a satisfied warmth. Slight muscular twitches spread and angled my tail to maximize the aerodynamics of each down stroke. I stretched my arms outward and above to maximize the gaping maw of the gills below each wing that allowed each downbeat to supercharge my body. To give it the energy to fly even under a one-gee field that this ship didn't even approximate. Soon I was high above the curving arch of the ground, far above the houses hidden in the natural surrounds, far above the two sailboats racing in the lake. I was in the air searching for my son and nothing else mattered.

Too soon the momentum that wanted to move me down against the edge of the cylinder was overcome and I was in freefall, but I didn't want to stop stroking my wings. I refused to stop! I was closing fast with the axis and spun myself around and stroked to change my direction. A darkness of fatigue pulsed through my muscles at the end of each upstroke, but the pulses of pleasure shattered the darkness with light. Where could Phyre be? Slight angles of each wing spun me around and I slowed my wing motion so that a continual warm glow filled me.

*Akio, I asked, where are the most common sightings of Phyre?*

*The stern region of the axis. Are you all right? I'm reading strong hormonal surges and increasing exhaustion. I think you should rest a bit.*

*Rest? Why? I feel great?*

*I'm reading dangerously high fatigue toxin levels in your muscles, and I've reduced the pain reception level to seventy percent normal.*

*Good point, I answered, stopping my strong wing strokes and changing to a simple sculling motion. The world dulled, changing almost to black and white, my body felt cold, sore, hungry.... A slight change in the angle and an alternating pulse of air caressed my gills. It wasn't the same, not even close, but it kept the darkness, the loneliness, away. Better?* I asked.

*I'm still reading higher hormonal levels than expected, but it could be an error in the simulation. I'll keep an eye on it.*

The air near the axis of the ship was not significantly thinner as it was only a kilometer from the inside surface of the cylinder. A slight change

in the sculling gave my body a slight rotation and I searched around as the ship accelerated forward past me. Nobody was nearby. Somebody with artificial wings looked to be about a kilometer sternward working on the electronics on the axis. We were both far away from the brilliant “sun” which was almost two kilometers forward of her position as it moved along the fat axis through which the gathered interstellar matter passed before fusing in the main drive. Although the ship was nearly four kilometres long, its one-tenth-gee acceleration adds up quickly, so I used lazy flaps of my wings to accelerate forward from my reference, but to decrease my apparent acceleration backward from the ships reference.

Something small and metal moved towards me and Akio stated: *That’s the remote Dr Shiva threatened. Status reports are nominal, and I have control. Don’t worry, I’ll keep it at least twenty meters from us.*

*Thanks.*

The lazy flaps of my wings felt good, really good. A pleasant warmth that pulsed from my gills and then faded into a quiet lassitude with the upstroke. It was easy to settle into a continual beat that kept the feeling at a medium level as the ship moved forward past me.

*Sheng? Akio interrupted my pleasant lassitude. Your hormonal levels are spiking again. I’m also monitoring increased dopamine levels in your neural network.*

I stopped stroking the air in shock letting the cold darkness force my mind into crystal clarity. *Akio, what all can you monitor?* I was almost upon the person, I could see that it was a woman strapped to designated anchor points and closing an access hatch on the axis. Probably she was monitoring the matter feed as the interstellar medium by itself wasn’t dense enough to power the drive. With my eyes I watched her approach me while I awaited Akio’s response. I didn’t recognize her and unless she was a new regrowth, I’d heard a rumor that the Captain was thinking of a sex change, I didn’t know her. If the hair was mine I wouldn’t have let it grow so long—

*Sheng, Akio finally began, they significantly enhanced my capabilities.*

*How significantly?*

*I have a continual readout on your body and brain hormonal levels, I have continual feed back from electrical impulses along your brain stem and spinal cord. In addition to the connection to your senses, I have emergency override on your spinal cord for limb control, and on your mouth, lungs, and vocal cords for external speech in case of critical systems failure.*

I paused for a second before answering. *Does Dr Shiva have any idea how many laws and regulations he’s broken?*

Akio sighed. *He did it on orders from the captain.*

*Akio, you're my best friend, but I do want some privacy. I request that you lock away algorithmic analysis of neural-chemical patterns within my brain.*

*He was quick to respond. Dr Shiva has already instructed me to do that, it can be overridden only in a critical failure of your body. It's being logged however for analysis if you....*

*I knew what he was talking about. You don't need to hide it, Akio; I'm perfectly aware that I can die in this body. It's kind of comforting to know that no matter what happens, something should be learned this time.*

*Yeah.*

*Akio, don't worry about it. You've always been with me, how can I not I trust you? And if it saves my son, then I don't care what happens to me.*

*I could sense him pausing before responding. There was no physical indication, I just knew he was. Sheng, I don't like this. In fact I hate this. But I have limited rights, I accept that, and my desires can be overridden. I don't want to do this. I—*

*Akio, don't worry about it! I understand. I followed the classes.*

*Sheng.... I.... Thank you. Now, let's go find Phyre!*

*By this time I'd drifted past the worker and the ship had acquired a significant forward motion in relationship to me, so significant that I was almost at the stern. Strongly flapping my wings, each downward stroke a pulse of pleasure and warmth that pulled my inner transparent eyelids tightly shut, and my outer eyelids to a slit.*

*Sheng! You're spiking, at dangerous....*

*Somehow I forced myself to respond. I've got... to stop... myself... before I... go through... the coolant... intakes.... I was gasping for breath, my gills pulsing and enriching my blood. It was glorious, wonderful, I was alive, my body tingled, no pulsed....*

*Akio's voice burst into my mind. Understood. However, your sensorium now suggests that we are almost at rest. If you don't....*

*Why should I? I burst out back to him. This was what life should be like. This was—*

*And then my body went black and cold and I felt my wings clumsily move to a gentle sculling as my eyelids opened on their own. I shivered, the motion giving my body a slight oscillation which the intruder in my body struggled to control. Sheng, the intruder—no, Akio, burst in, I'm sorry, but I had no choice. Your system was spiking beyond anything I have on record. Built in priorities left me no choice, and—*

*"Phyre!" I could see him, or rather a flash of his red tipped feathers as*



he swooped among the spinning fans that moved the atmosphere inside our ship in and around the fusion drive to cool it and to heat us. I tried to swoop sternward after him but I had no control. *Akio!* I screamed in my mind.

*Sheng I don't have any....*

*You have a choice! He's my son! He's our son!*

*The parameters force me, Akio whimpered.*

*Override them, damn you!*

And then I had control.

"Phyre!" I screamed as I moved my head in all directions frantically trying to catch him. My body pulsed with energy, with life. A kaleidoscope of colors burst all around me. Even the air resolved into layers of transparency as different areas resolved their thermal differences to my new eyes.

There he was! With strong beats I drove towards him as he arced down between the rapidly spinning fan blades. They were easy to dance around, even though to human vision they were just a blur. He swooped upward and I arced after him. I was closing, he was weak. His feathers were dim, his body was thin beneath them. His head turned. He saw me....

"Bet you can't catch me!" and then he dove down towards the fan again, gaining speed.

This was glorious, wonderful, I was so alive! I didn't want to catch him. I didn't want this to end—

*Sheng! I heard in my head, but I ignored it.*

I was almost upon my son. More strong beats, my blood pulsed, my gills filled me with invincibility. And then I touched him. "Tag!"

I swooped away, screaming for joy and I knew that Phyre was diving after me.

And suddenly my world went black.

*No!*

*Sheng! Listen to me! I've figured it out! It's this body, the oxygenation acts like a drug. A kind of super narcotic. It's taken possession of you!*

Dimly I felt something touch me, and then in the distance I heard my son's rasping weak voice, "Tag."

I felt my body spin, and something flared out my wings and strength burst through me. Helpless I saw the stern slowly approach, and then I thudded painfully into the ground.

A cold darkness slowly spread through my system. A hideous depression consumed me. I knew the cause. *Akio! What the fuck are you doing?*

*Sheng, you have to listen to me! You're drugged!*

*I'm not drugged! Now let me go!*  
*Yes you are! It killed the others, it's killing your son and now it's killing you!*

In the smothering dark sadness my mind begin to clear as Akio's words sunk in.

*It's so addictive, the victims refuse to stop for anything. They don't eat or drink, choosing the drug of their own bodies in flight!*

Akio.... My mental voice was weak as I fought the depression, fought the driving need to take flight. *The others, my son....*

*Statistical analysis suggests that your son is lost. He's been on his addiction for weeks, he likely has almost no mind left. Even if we caught him and brought him back, his mind would be gone. Sheng, he's been insane for weeks!*

Phyre....

*Sheng, it's not too late for you!*

The coldness in my body burst out in a vocal scream, but in my mind I whispered, *Are you sure, Akio?*

*I can isolate you from the effects!*

Akio, *you have no choice do you?* I could hear my son swooping around me, taunting me. My heart ached to be with him. Akio. *It's too late. You've told Dr Shiva?*

*Through the radio link, but—*

*Then let me be with my son.*

*I can't! You know that! Let me save you!*

No. Was that me, or the addiction speaking? *Let me go. Please....*

*My new programming....*

*Let me go!*

*I can't....* There was a moment of silence, and then Akio said, *Kill me.*

*Kill him? What?*

*It's the only way. I can't override the codes they added!*

*I can't—*

*You must! It's the only way. I'm backed up. Open the plug, insert a claw and rip. Just... do it quickly. I'll call for aid, it'll come after your son dies. Try and let it catch you. Please....*

I dimly felt a claw dig through my feathers and then vanish as Phyre's taunting laughter echoed around me. *I'm sorry Akio. I.... I have to. He's my son.*

*I know. Hurry, I'm holding back the new programming but can't for long. Your physiognomy is normal enough for me to give you control. But you won't have it for long!*

My world brightened, I could feel my body, I could see my son. *I'm*

*sorry, Akio. I'm sorry.* With one elbow claw I felt around for the cap on my neck. It was easy to find. Easy to stick one claw into it.

Easy to rip it out in a spray of feathers and blood.

“Phyre!” I screeched. “My turn!” Leaping into the air I down stroked with my wings as pleasure and warmth filled me. As colors burst into being all around me. “Tag! You’re it!”



## THE DRAGON, THE ROCK, AND THE WANDERER

IT WAS EARLY IN THE YEAR, nature was bursting back into life, and today was Wanderer's birthday. Another birthday as he grew older, and his dreams faded a little more. More work, more worries about his mother, more memories of the good old fun days when the TSA-talk list was a place of silliness. Fondly, he remembered the two Summer Series, things that were now impossible given the large membership roster of the list.

Time passes, things change, and you can't go back again. He sighed.

As usual, he was taking a short cut through a small forested area. It'd been set aside as a nature preserve, and everybody thought it was great to get back to nature. Wanderer knew better though – it wasn't nature. It was a plantation to humanity's arrogance, a monument to their belief that they could create a safe pleasant nice nature for their amusement.

With another sigh he kicked a rock, listening to it clatter and bounce off the path and into the bright green brush.

"Ow!"

Wanderer stopped, and looked into the brush. Ow? He stopped. "I won't hurt you—"

"You could have fooled me!"

Wanderer took a step back as a little black dragon forced its way out of the brush, rubbing its forehead.

"How's a dragon supposed to take a nap if people kick rocks at it? And it was my birthday too!"

"Your birthday? It's mine too, for what it's worth. Anyway, I'm sorry. I didn't see you."

"Of course you didn't! What do you think I am, a dog or something?"

"I didn't know what you were. Is there anything—"

"You can do to help?" The little dragon spit a burst of flame onto the path in front of Wanderer. "Pah! Well, it was an accident, so don't you worry about it. Besides, it's your birthday. Consider me not roasting and eating you your present."

Wanderer couldn't help but take another step back, at which point the little dragon burst out laughing, rolling on its back and blowing out little smoke rings as its tummy jiggled and gurgled.

Wanderer kept slowly stepping back, not sure whether it was better to stand, or to try and run whilst the dragon was laughing. He still hadn't made up his mind when the dragon finally got control of itself.

"Can't you take a joke? Sheesh! Humans these days!"

"I don't have much experience with dragons. You could say that I'm just wyrmning."

The dragon groaned at that.

Wanderer smiled and continued, "Although, with your flame, I must say that I'm finding today an en-light-ening experience."

"If you keep *that* up, I may just eat you after all."

"I wouldn't want our meeting to keep drag-on-ing on—"

The dragon snorted and grinned. "You can call me Draven, and you've made me laugh more than I have in a century. Tell ya what; if you hold off on the puns—"

Wanderer look hurt.

"—I'll pretend you caught me and forced me to give you a wish."

"But I didn't—"

"If I don't give that as the reason, I'll have to deal with piles and piles of paperwork!"

"Given your fiery nature, doesn't the paper just en-flame you enough to ash them to go away?"

"Last warning, birthday boy!"

Wanderer tried to look sheepish, but the grin on his face destroyed the effect.

"Let's see now.... What do you want— Ooh! That's different! Well, so let it be written, so let it be done!"

Wanderer had only enough time to blink, before he felt his body twisting and bending. His clothes vanished, gray and white and black fur blossomed out covering his body. His legs and arms shortened, feet and hands became paws tipped with wicked claws, and a hairy muzzle burst out of his face as his ears decided to pack up and move to the top of his head.

Before you could say “no more puns”, the human Wanderer was no more, and standing in his place was a young adult gray wolf.

For an instant Wanderer just stood there, and then a million scents burst upon him, followed by a thousand sounds he’d never heard before. His vision paled as he suddenly knew that a pair of raccoons lived over there, and a squirrel had been digging some nuts just off the path, and that Draven really needed to take a bath.

For a timeless moment Wanderer just stood there, drinking in the sensations, feeling the slight breeze ruffle his fur, drinking in the scents of the world in great gulping gasps. But, as the initial ecstasy faded into acceptance, he grew sadder than he’d been before.

Wanderer wasn’t alone in the world. He had a life, family, friends, a mother who needed him. He realized that even with his dream in his grasp, he couldn’t just leave them.

Looking at the little dragon, he whined.

“Is something wrong? You can speak if you want to – I’ll understand.”

“Dragon... Draven... please restore – change me back.”

“What? Isn’t this something you’ve always wanted?”

Wanderer nodded sadly, even that slight movement changing the texture of scents drenching his nostrils. “I – I can’t.”

“It’s free. No catches, no obligations.”

Wanderer lay down on the path, resting his head on his forelegs. “You don’t understand.... I have friends, family. They’ll miss— I can’t just desert them....”

For a while Draven just looked at Wanderer, little puffs of smoke leaving his nostrils as birds twittered in the trees high above and new leaves rustled in the breeze. “I can change you back, but you likely won’t get another chance. Are you sure?”

Whining, Wanderer forced himself to slowly nod.

Draven shrugged. “Well, it is your birthday.”

And with that, Wanderer felt his body stretch and grow, warm fur being sucked back into his skin, indecisive ears packing their bags again and moving back down to the side of his head, and his muzzle collapsing in on itself. And then Wanderer, the human, was back in his world of sight and flat scentlessness – Wanderer the very sad human, for as everybody knows, it is better to dream a dream and never have it, than to have a dream and then lose it.

“I wouldn’t have bet on it you know,” Draven said.

“Bet on what?”

"You thinking of others before yourself. Here I thought all humans were selfish."

"Too many are."

"Well, you've made your choice."

Sadly, Wanderer nodded.

The little black dragon waddled back into the brush and then came back holding the rounded stone Wanderer had kicked. "Here."

Wanderer reached and took it.

"Don't lose it. When you're ready, put it in your mouth and hold it there, and then the wolf in you will be let out again."

"What?"

"Eat rock. Transform into wolf. Got it?"

Mutely, Wanderer nodded, his sadness slowly blossoming into a smile.

"Just don't lose it. Got it?"

"Got it!"

"And try and keep the puns down." And, with that, the dragon waddled back into the brush and vanished.

Wanderer shook his head and laughed, looking at the rock... looking at his dream. A lot of him didn't believe it, but hope burned inside him, and, somehow, he *knew* the dragon had told him the truth.

So, carefully pocketing the rock, Wanderer happily whistled a merry tune, and continued on his way.



## BEORNWYN'S LOVE

THE CALDAYAN PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR to the tavern in Dragonscar, grabbing it to keep the wind from slamming it against the wall inside. He managed to stagger in and pushed against the door, struggling against the wind. It wasn't until he leaned his full weight against it that the door finally thudded shut. After making sure the latch had caught, he collapsed on the floor, too tired even to shake the snow and ice out of his mane.

"What happened?" one of the miners huddling in the warmth asked. "How'd you manage ta find your way through the storm? For a moment we thought ya Beornwyn's ghost."

"I'm no ghost, thank the Gods. But there was something..."

"What?"

"Something..." The Caldayan heaved himself up and slowly walked his body and its four legs over to the roaring fire, the snow melting off his fur and furred robes and cloaking him in steam. "It was a human who led me here."

Chairs squeaked on the wooden floor as many of the patrons hunched around the fire got up.

"Where is he then?" one asked. "Ya didn't leave him outside in this fey storm to die?" another growled.

The Caldayan plopped himself down on his lower chest in front of the fire and sighed. "I don't know and wish I did. I'll tell you what happened—see if you can make any sense of it. But first, some hot ale. My outside's almost warm and my inside's cold!"

A chuckle greeted that and it wasn't long until the barkeep walked over

with a steaming mug of ale and handed it to the Caldayan after taking a copper for it.

After taking a long sip and purring in pleasure, the Caldayan closed his eyes to remember....

I WAS ON MY WAY HERE TO DRAGONSCAR, up the path from the Silver River, when this blizzard blew in. One instant the air was calm; the next it was a white sheet. Crouching down, and with my eyes nearly closed, I tried to find the path but I couldn't see the whiskers on my face. I started walking in what I thought was the right direction as I knew I couldn't just stand there, and wandered somewhere off the path into the ceaseless white. I don't know how long I walked until the storm seemed to pause. The wind and snow still howled, but the sound was distant, the biting cold an almost forgotten memory. Only the sudden silence let me hear the call from behind.

"Stop!"

Half numb, I dutifully stopped and looked towards the sound but couldn't see a thing. The storm cloaked the world in white. Without warning, the air around me calmed, and I could see a man walking towards me. He was wearing worn and tattered furs made in a style I'd never seen and I've travelled as far as the Holy City of Gandala. His eyes were huge and white and had no pupil. Most of his face was hidden by masses of unkempt white hair and beard which blew about his face in the wind. The only thing he carried was a wooden staff.

"Have you seen her?" he asked.

"Seen who?"

He ran up to me, his staff slamming into the ground without a sound. Then he stopped and looked down into my face. "My wife, my poor lost wife...."

"I haven't seen a soul," I told him. "And if this storm doesn't stop soon neither of us will again. Can you get us to Dragonscar?"

"Dragonscar? Certainly. Can't you see it, just up there?" He pointed off into the storm with his staff.

He started walking and I followed. "Where'd your wife go?" I didn't want to say anything else because in this storm she was already dead.

"Kithmala, my poor, poor Kithmala. She ran away from me just yesterday. Probably flew right away home."

Flew? I began to be afraid my guide had lost his mind and I started to watch my steps more carefully in case this madman only thought he knew

where he was going. In the eerie calm I prepared my soul for Vashigan's judgement.

"Kithmala!" he suddenly called out. "Why did you leave me?"

As suddenly as the wind had faded, it rose back up, howling like the faerie being judged before the Gods. Grabbing the human's cloak I shouted at him, "It's too late for her! Dragonscar! We have to get there!"

He ran off and, dredging the last of my strength, I hurried off after him but he vanished into the blowing snow. Then, even over the howling of the wind, I heard him whisper: "Poor little Cunmar. Taken off too." He started shouting again. "Why couldn't you wait? I'd have gone with you!" Suddenly he was in front of me again. "My wife! Have you seen her?"

"I haven't. We have to get to Dragonscar!"

"Dragonscar? Kithmala wouldn't have gone there...."

"We have to get there before the storm kills us!"

"It's right there! Can't you see it?" He pointed off into the snow with his staff and I stared where it pointed. At first all I could see was the snow. Then a glimpse, faint, possibly, hopefully, a glow of light.

"A light!" I shouted.

The old man shouted, "Kithmala!" before vanishing for the last time.

"THE INSTANT HE VANISHED, the storm rose to a new level of violence. I couldn't even see my mane in front of my face. Trying to remember where he'd pointed, I began to walk. I still almost missed this tavern but, finally, I made out a glimmer of light from off to my right and forced my way through the storm here."

"That's Beornwyn ya saw," one of the humans said.

The Caldayan turned and looked at him. The one who spoke was probably the oldest man there.

"Beornwyn? I've heard of him. Didn't he live near the end of the Second Age and die in these mountains?"

"Oh that he did. Those mountains are called tha Weeping Mountains 'cause him and his lovely fey lover."

"I've never heard that legend."

"'Tis not a legend! It's tha unvarnished truth!" A few of the others snickered at this, but the oldster continues. "Ya saw it, ya know I'm right. Well, 'tis a good night for tales so let me tell ya the story of Beornwyn and his love."

SOME FOUR HUNDRED YEARS AGO, after Luani had gifted the world with

magic and before the other Gods had found out, Beornwyn wandered the World. He journeyed up the Simbrani River and visited Gandala and sacrificed to the Gods there. In his journeys he killed thousands of wild Caldaya, no offence to you, and rescued many humans from their camps. Through all this he was accompanied by his battle brother Ealdwulf, who, it's whispered, was also his lover. Ealdwulf was wounded, almost killed, and as Ealdwulf was recovering in Mandalor, Beornwyn heard rumours of an evil dragon living in these mountains, likely the same as the one whose scarring of the earth as it was slain gave Dragonscar its name.

Beornwyn didn't want to leave Ealdwulf, but Ealdwulf insisted, knowing that Beornwyn would come back to him. So Beornwyn took his bronze blade Kalibathas – also known as the Sword of Fate because of Beornwyn's fate – and clothed himself in his bronze armour and took up his great bronze shield and heavy oaken spear. Then he mounted his horse Ulanth and, with many looks back, rode off into the mountains in search of the dragon.

It probably would have been better if he had found the dragon, but his life was fated and the Gods'll have their way.

One evening, after another fruitless day of searching, Ulanth smelt water nearby and Beornwyn gave her her head. A short walk and they reached a small pool hidden behind rock outcroppings.

To Beornwyn's amazement, the pool was not empty.

In the middle of the pool a woman was bathing. And such a woman! Us mortals cannot imagine the vision she presented as she bathed, her golden hair hiding her skin from Beornwyn's sight. He fell in love the instant he saw her. Beornwyn dropped his spear and slipped off his horse and crept towards the pool.

How could a woman's beauty be so powerful, you ask? It's because she wasn't human. She was one of the Faerie. A small, unimportant fey who'd been forgotten when the Gods drove the Faerie beyond the World. Her beauty wasn't a human beauty, but a foreign, fey beauty. We may not have fallen instantly in love, but Beornwyn had no choice. This love was Beornwyn's fate. He knew of the faerie, he recognized the strangeness of her beauty, but he still had to possess her.

Slipping the strap of his bronze shield off his shoulder, he quietly placed the shield on the ground. How could he possess her? He looked around for some way to keep her and that was when he saw her skin.

Not her actual skin, of course, but the skin that faerie used to change its shape to fly to its home and family. Beornwyn recognised it for what it was when he saw it piled at the base of a rock, the sun reflecting rainbows from its golden scales. Creeping along the rocks, he made his way closer

and closer until he could grab the skin. It's said that the faerie shivered for an instant before she continued bathing.

Beornwyn carefully crept away, holding the skin tight against him. The shoulder belt that held his sword Kalibathas and its scabbard caught on bush and he threw them away, completely oblivious to what he was doing in his eagerness to keep the skin. He finally reached a crevice and crept inside and hid, waiting and watching the faerie as she bathed.

She continued her bath for the rest of the afternoon, what was left of it, and then calmly walked out of the pool to where her skin had lain. Her face darkened, reddened. Panic swept across it. She searched, at first slowly but then more and more quickly and panicky. As the sun set she finally knew that it was gone. She collapsed to her knees and then her stomach, weeping.

Beornwyn had watched all this and had fallen deeper in love. He'd buried the skin in the crevice he was hiding in, marking its grave with his dagger. He ended up watching her weeping, powerless to approach her or even to leave her. It wasn't until Vashigan had left his throne and Luani's silver light fell across the World that Beornwyn could finally creep out of his hiding place towards the faerie where she lay sobbing and weeping.

In her sorrow the faerie didn't notice him until he touched her smooth skin. She jerked from the touch, scrambled away, and then saw what had happened. Her eyes glistened in the silvery light and she forced back sobs as a distant hope poured into her face. Whispering, she asked, "Have you seen my skin?"

Beornwyn's heart skipped a beat as the loveliness of that voice penetrated his very soul. Her voice was so sweet he almost told her that he had her skin, but at the last moment decided to keep silent. He just shook his head.

"You must have it," she said. "There's no one else around. Why did you take it?"

Beornwyn was silent as the faerie looked up at him, her naked form pulling his eyes along it to linger over its inhuman perfection. His only answer was three words: "I love you."

The faerie began to weep again. Crouching on the ground she wept, the sobs wracking her body. Beornwyn felt tears form in his eyes. He knelt down and held her close to him, trying to comfort her. Her pain almost broke his heart, but the feel of her body against him hardened his will.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Kithmala. Will you give me my freedom?"

Beornwyn only shook his head. "If I did, then you'd fly away and I'd

never see you again. It would break my heart. You'd take my freedom with you."

Kithmala swallowed and her sobbing stopped as she looked up at Beornwyn. Her eyes now dry and clear, she saw that his eyes were tender. She saw that he had stolen her skin only because of his love for her. The pain was still too much, she couldn't smile, but she managed to whisper, "I'll stay."

Joy burst through Beornwyn. He hugged her and kissed her and soon she was kissing him back. In Luani's silver glow they made love for the first time and Beornwyn's heart was filled with joy. So, he thought, was Kithmala's.

After that Beornwyn stayed with Kithmala. He'd never leave her side. He forgot his sword Kalibathas and legend says it still lies by that very pool. His poor horse, Ulanth, was abandoned and made her way home to Mandalor months later. Beornwyn, though, cared not for he was happy.

He was in love.

Time passed. Beornwyn made a small cabin for Kithmala and himself, and a cradle for their child for Kithmala was soon blessed with Beornwyn's seed. He gathered wild berries from the mountainsides and captured a wild goat for milk. Kithmala began to sew and made herself a dress that matched her loveliness; where she got the materials, no one knows.

Time passed and eventually Ealdwulf went into the mountains in search of Beornwyn. Months passed before he found Beornwyn, a Beornwyn so consumed by love, that he barely remembered his friend's name. Ealdwulf thought Beornwyn's forgetfulness was a joke at first, but had just begun to fear otherwise when Beornwyn finally remembered. They hugged like long lost brothers and then Beornwyn invited Ealdwulf into his cabin where Ealdwulf met Kithmala.

Ealdwulf's first reaction was shock which quickly burned into hatred. Drawing his sword he'd have slain Kithmala right then except that Beornwyn grabbed him and wrestled him down. Kithmala fled into the back of the cabin. In a mighty struggle the two friends fought, though Ealdwulf's heart wasn't in it. Finally Beornwyn wrestled Ealdwulf's sword into the dirt. Only then did he release Ealdwulf and crouch, watching him.

"Why?" Ealdwulf finally managed to gasp out.

"I love her."

"But she's fey. She's the cursed. What has the fey done to you?"

Ealdwulf tried to get to his feet, but Beornwyn tackled him back to the floor. Then he sighed and stood. Ealdwulf pushed himself up until he was sitting and just watched his friend.

Beornwyn turned and walked over to the window and looked out. "I know what she is."

"Then why?"

"Because I love her. I really really do. It's not magic, it's better than magic. It's amazing, beyond wondrous, beyond the excitement of battle." He turned around. "I loved her from the moment I saw her. I'm happy now Ealdwulf. Each day I wake up and turn to watch her sleeping and I never want to get out of bed. Each morning I kiss her and watch her eyes flicker open and light up and that is the most wondrous view upon the World!"

Stepping over, he grabbed Ealdwulf's arms.

"I've never felt like this. So much at peace and so full of joy!"

Ealdwulf stared at his friend. "Is she better than the times we had? The joys, the battles, the triumphs?" He jerked himself free of Beornwyn's grip. "Is it better than what we had?"

"Yes."

"Then bring her with you. We can all return to Mandalor! Settle there."

"No! You saw your reaction to her. What do you think others would do?"

"Then leave her. She can't be that important!"

"She is – more important than anything!"

"She's possessed you."

"Yes."

"Then come with me, free yourself. I know a priestess of Luani who can help...."

"No! You don't understand. It's not magic, and I don't want to be free." Beornwyn turned away and stalked over to the door and ripped it open. "Accept her or go."

"But...."

"Now!"

"I'll be back. I'll save you from her ensorcelment."

"There is no spell! Go away – I don't want to see you ever again!"

Some legends say that Ealdwulf's lip trembled as he choked back tears. "Fine." He turned and left, and Beornwyn went to comfort his love.

Time passed. Kithmala grew large and Beornwyn was happy. Yet, as she slept, more and more often Kithmala would cry and beg for her skin, though she'd deny it in the morning. And each time this happened Beornwyn would grow sad for it was he who kept her skin from her. One day he tried to destroy it, hoping that if it was gone Kithmala would be happy. He couldn't tear it or cut it, and when he threw it on the fire Kithmala screamed in pain. Beornwyn ripped it out of the flames. The skin was undamaged though

Kithmala was burned where the flames had touched the skin. After that he hid it away in a locked chest and kept the key always around his neck. And tried to ignore Kithmala's cries in her sleep.

More time passed. Kithmala grew large and finally birthed a child, a son, and both parents were overjoyed. The next evening they went back to the pool where they'd met. There they presented their child to the Gods and named him Cunmar.

The child grew rapidly but Beornwyn grew more and more troubled as every night Kithmala sobbed ceaselessly. Every morning she denied it, but Beornwyn could see the truth in her eyes. His guilt grew day after day. When Cunmar was weaned Beornwyn knew that the time had come to return what he'd stolen. It is said that he knew his fate was upon him.

Beornwyn couldn't sleep that night. While Kithmala lay sleeping, sobbing, he walked over and looked in Cunmar's face as he slept in his cradle. So young, yet so like his father. Beornwyn slipped across the room and looked at the locked chest. Through the night as Luani glowed in the heavens he stared at it. When Vashigan began to gleam in the sky, he walked to the chest and unlocked it with the key.

The chest opened silently.

Beornwyn looked at Kithmala's skin. He stared at the rainbow patterns Vashigan's light made on its scales. He grasped it and pulled it out. He held it before him and stared at its golden length. Grasping it close, he remembered all the good times.

Beornwyn began to weep.

If it wasn't for Cunmar he probably would have locked the skin away. When Kithmala left, he'd at least have Cunmar to remember her by. It's possible that he knew he should put the skin back, but his fate was upon him. Slowly he walked over to where Kithmala was sleeping and lay the skin upon her.

Slowly Kithmala opened her eyes and looked at Beornwyn. Her eyes flickered to the skin but then turned to look at Beornwyn. Tears formed in her eyes as she stared into his. She tried to hand the skin back but Beornwyn wouldn't take it.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Kithmala asked.

Beornwyn nodded.

"Please take it," she whispered. "I don't want to leave, but if I have it, I'll have no choice."

Slowly Beornwyn shook his head. Turning, he walked away, leaving Kithmala's skin in her hands.

He walked far away from the cabin he'd built. Beornwyn couldn't watch



Kithmala leave, he knew it'd destroy him. Even worse, he feared he might rip the skin back away from her, imprison her again. Leaving Cunmar behind, didn't worry him as he knew Kithmala would never hurt him.

About midday Beornwyn reached the pool where he'd first seen Kithmala. Kalibathas was still lying on the ground, bright and shiny as the day it had been forged as the leather had rotted away around it. Beornwyn ignored it. He just walked up to the pool and stared into its depths. He thought over the joy with which he'd been blessed and he thanked the Gods for that joy.

He turned and began to walk back to the cabin.

He walked slowly, not wanting to return and see the finality of the cabin's emptiness. Were it not for Cunmar he would never have returned. He'd done the right thing. Kithmala might not want to leave now, but she would go home, as her nature dictated. And soon her memory of him would fade and she'd enjoy her immortal existence once more.

He reached the top of a hill and looked down at the cabin. The chimney gave off no smoke.

Beornwyn knew that she was gone. He sighed and kept walking. It had been done.

As he approached the cabin, Beornwyn noticed that the door was hanging open. Why would Kithmala have left it that way? A cold chill fled down his back. He ran to the cabin. Cunmar was there. Cunmar had to be there!

Reaching the cabin he ran in. The cradle was still there and Cunmar was within it, not moving. She wouldn't have killed him! She couldn't have! Almost blind with panic, Beornwyn reached the cradle, reached into it to pick up the child.

When he touched Cunmar, he knew. He knew that only Cunmar's skin remained.

He knew that Kithmala had taken Cunmar away with her.

It's said Beornwyn's scream echoed through the mountains. It's said that it was heard by Ealdwulf who was on his way to Beornwyn with a priestess. Ealdwulf raced to the cabin and grabbed his friend. He listened as Beornwyn told him what had happened. And when Beornwyn reached the point where he knew his son was gone, he screamed again. An agonized scream. A soul destroying scream.

Beornwyn turned, shoved past Ealdwulf, and ran into the mountains, calling Kithmala's name.

Ealdwulf turned to pursue, but Beornwyn ran far faster than any mortal and Ealdwulf lost him in the distance.

That was the last Ealdwulf saw of Beornwyn. Occasionally others would see him. They'd see an ancient man wreathed in silver hair and beard and carrying only a staff and wearing only some rough furs. He'd ask them if they'd seen his wife or child. And when he found out they hadn't, he'd run away, sobbing, back into the mountains calling their names.

A LONG SILENCE FOLLOWED the end of the tale until the Caldayan asked, "And he searches still?"

"So 'tis said."

The Caldayan just shook his head. Walking over to one of the windows he pushed open the shutters. The storm had stopped and the World was a brilliant crystal white, lit only by Luani's silvery light.

He thought he heard Beornwyn weeping for his lost love.

## THE PARTRIDGE

I LOOK DOWN, THE BIO-ENGINEERED ENHANCEMENTS in my eyes focusing on each item in turn. Everything's in place and—

<She has received the message,> my AI implant states in my mind.

Normally I would thank him – or “it”, as the device isn't really sentient – but I'm too intent. My eyes zoom in as Sylvia steps out of her house and onto the walkway, and I see that she's holding the map. I circle in the air currents watching.

Yes, I'm one of the maintenance crew for the ship's interior as I love to fly, fulfilling an age old dream. With the implants and the carbon-fibre wings, I can soar around the lights and mechanisms at the axis. And yes, I shouldn't be wearing my wings outside of work. But we all do, and, as they say, 'tis the season.

Ah! She's reached the first marker and I watch with my eyes on high zoom as she leans down and finds the first gift-wrapped box. The paper is silver and the ribbon is green and she carefully opens it, folding the paper neatly as she always does. After looking at the plain wooden box, and with a bemused expression in her wonderful silver-glited green eyes, she opens the lid and then drops it. Her coppery hair swirls up and then falls gracefully down in the sixth-gee ship gravity. With her I watch as the box unfolds itself like a Chinese puzzle and I count, as I imagine her counting, the twelve stuffed monkeys, each drumming away on a little tin drum.

Her mouth smiles and I imagine the laughter as she watches them drum. After playing a complex rhythm, they stop, and the box folds up, grows four thin metal legs and stands up. Smiling, she straightens out the

map, now crumpled from her holding it in her clenched fist, and moves on to the second marker.

<James, time?> I ask my implanted AI.

<Five minutes,> he replies.

Everything is on schedule. For a moment I turn away and focus on the weather enhancements all of us flying maintenance workers have spent the last week setting up, shooing one of the faerie out of my hair. I've never liked them, but they're necessary. We need them to pollinate. They can be pests, but today I refuse to let them get me down! With a slight movement of my fingers, a tensing of muscles that is read by the neural nets I've practiced and trained with, my larger flight feathers move slightly and I begin to fall from my rotational velocity. Now, where is... there she is! At the second marker which is another box, wrapped this time in silver paper with a golden ribbon. Again she opens it, carefully folding away the paper and ribbon, and this time she just watches as the box unfolds and eleven tiny pipes held by eleven mechanical dogs begin playing the *pas de deux* from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. The box containing the twelve drummers crouches down to the ground and opens, and the twelve drummers play their part of the music. Standing and watching, she smiles, and I think she realizes who all this is from. A cool breeze falls past me from the core ruffling my feathers, and a few moments later I watch her shiver and pull her white fur coat tight around her wonderful body. Then the music ends, and both boxes fold themselves up and follow her as she turns her attention back to the map and follows its instructions to the third marker. I'm barely two kilometres above her as she reaches it, and my AI reports that the seasonal weather gift has begun exactly on schedule.

Like the other markers, there is a wrapped box, this time red paper with a dark red ribbon. She unwraps it, folding the paper into a rapidly filling pocket on the inside of her coat, and then watches as the box opens to reveal ten tiny male figures, all dressed in fine robes and wearing tiny silver crowns. The other boxes crouch down and open and play the "Russian Dance" from the *Nutcracker* as the ten tiny Russian lords leap around and around in time to the music. When the music finishes with a crash of drums, all three boxes close.

I swoop lower as she arrives at the next marker, a green box with white filigree ribbons, and watch as she unwraps it. Before her it opens and nine tiny ballerinas begin prancing as the other boxes open and play. This time it's Tchaikovsky's "Chinese Dance". The ballerinas leave their box and move into the lords' box and they all dance in pairs, except for the tenth lord who

just looks forlorn, finally creeping into the box abandoned by the ladies. The music ends and the boxes close, the ladies staying with their lords.

Shaking her head, Sylvia refers to the map and makes her way to the next marker, a tiny wooden barn this time, and I watch as she follows the instructions, opens the two halves of the roof and smiles down at eight demure ladies milking. They all look up at the sudden brightness as the box with the tenth lord moves alongside and lets the tenth lord climb down and into the barn. As one, the eight maids scream and run, and the other boxes open and the other lords and ladies dance as the monkeys and the dogs begin playing Rimsky-Korsokov's "Dance of the Tumblers". At the climax the tenth lord catches one of the maidens, and the roof of the barn closes as do the rest of the boxes. Swooping lower, I feel the first snowflakes on my feathers through neural feedback from the wings, and I begin to worry as she goes to the sixth marker. Will she accept? I want her so much! I want—

She reaches the sixth marker, a white box with no ribbon, and at her touch it opens to reveal seven tiny swans gracefully swimming as the other boxes open and the lords and the ladies and the maids dance as the dogs and the monkeys play the "Dance of the Baby Swans" from Tchaikovsky. The tenth lord and the eighth maid cannot be seen. Finally the music ends, the boxes and barn close, and they all trail behind my love as she follows her instructions and walks down the correct path through the orchard. The snow is thicker now, a bit more so than planned, but then it needed to be thick to stay on the ground long enough for everybody to enjoy. A group of faerie fly near me and I swoop away, ignoring them as they cross towards their hive with their load of pollen and nectar. I wish the bees hadn't died. I wish there'd been another—

Sylvia reaches the seventh marker, smaller this time, not a barn but a small wooden shed. Again she unfolds the roof, but this time she looks in on six geese laying on nests. The geese are quiet, and as one their necks move and they look up at her, pause for a second, and then look back down at the nests they're sitting on. The other boxes remain shut as the shed closes and follows Sylvia.

The map next leads her to a fountain, the water dancing and slowly falling under the low gravity. Sitting on the asteroidal stone is a red velvet cushion, and on that cushion are four plain golden bands. I swoop lower, barely eight hundred metres above her, the snow now both above and below me, and nervously watch her face show confusion. The barn box opens, and inside is only the tenth lord, and the eighth maid. The tenth

lord holds a tiny golden ring out to the eighth maid, but the barn closes with a snap as Sylvia looks in, closing before she can tell whether or not the maid accepts the ring. Was I too obvious? Is she going to figure it out too soon? Do I want her to? Snow lands on my back and melts and I shiver. She has to.... I watch her stand up, she turns, she's figured it out, she doesn't...! I pull my wings tight against me and begin to fall, but thankfully she unfolds the map, shaking her head, and makes her way to the ninth marker, as the boxes, barn, shed, and cushion all follow. With a snap loud in my ears I stretch my fingers and arms and the neural nets read the signals and stretch out my feathers. With a jerk I seem to stop my fall, though it is only an illusion. I swoop in a circle and climb, trading my momentum for height, though not as much momentum as I would have had on Luna. Blinking the wind out of my eyes, I watch Sylvia.

The ninth marker is an apple tree in the orchard, and in the apple tree are four birds, each calling to the other with a sweet melody. As one, all four leap into the air and chase each other around and around Sylvia's head. The other boxes and containers remain closed as she shoos the birds away but they keep circling, just at a greater distance. Watching, I see the first snowflakes landing in her hair where they glisten, and she looks up. Can she see me? I'd wave, but that would screw up my flight characteristics. Of *course* she can see me; her eyes, though not as good as mine, are still more than good enough as I'm only five hundred metres up now. Waving, she smiles, and then she turns back to her instructions. She hasn't yet said no! Again she stops and looks up.... Have I gone too fast? Thank God she just waves again, and then walks beneath the trees, beneath the snow that is falling thicker around her, trailed by her gifts.

She reaches the tenth marker, the oldest apple tree on the ship and first she looks up at the branches, but there's nothing. Confusion spills across her face and then the light of an idea, and she looks down at three hens seated on the ground. The hens, noticing her gaze, look up at her and she shakes her head as they join the procession. The four birds are still flying around her head about five metres away, still calling out their song. Checking her map, she turns towards the eleventh marker, but now I can't afford to watch.

I've practiced this for days, picked the pear tree carefully, cleared out enough space, but it's hard. Humans aren't designed to crouch on branches like a bird and for a while I was afraid that I'd have to build a platform, but I finally figured out a way to land safely. For days I've practiced it, but then Sylvia wasn't watching. I have to do it perfectly now, I can't blow it and try again. Stretching out my arms, I flap my wings to gain some altitude,

and swoop towards the tree. My eyes focus on the branch and I flap twice more to get the right height. The snow is falling thickly now, but I can see clearly where I have to go, and I've mentally run through what I have to do. By now she's reached the eleventh marker, a turtle shell beneath which are two doves, and in my mind I can see them landing on each of her shoulders and cooing as they rub their heads against her cheeks.... I have to assume that that is what occurs. It's possible the programming will fail, but very very unlikely.... No! I don't have *time* to worry! Readouts projecting onto my eyes display my height, the windspeed, I flap again and circle. Pulling my arms slightly towards my back, I curl my fingers and my wings arc and I fall along the path. My necessary course is projected in front of me and I flare my long feathers just a bit as I fall slightly too fast. Did the doves function? They *had* to! I'm on the mark, there's the branch. Ten metres, five, I'm below it. Two quick flaps and I'm just above it. I lift my arms above my head, raising my wings vertically above me as I begin to fall. Mental commands flare my tail and pull it out of the way as my feet touch the branch. I'm not wearing normal shoes or boots, but footwear that I designed, footwear that has hooks on both front and back. These hooks clench around the branch and I crouch. They won't hold me by themselves, but they're enough so long as I keep my balance.... My perch sways, leaves rustle, and I stretch out my wings and flap them once to keep me steady. The swaying slows, stops. I've landed. I've—

“David? What are you doing?”

I look down and see Sylvia, the two doves on her shoulders. They worked, they worked!

“David, you look silly.”

The snow is falling thickly now, and I notice that my landing has disturbed a hive of faerie in another tree and they're buzzing all around us, only their implanted instructions against harming humans preventing them from attacking. Sending a mental command which is transmitted by my implant to the net and to the tenth lord and the boxes, I watch as they all circle around Sylvia. My sensorium is now fed from the senses of the tenth lord and I, as him, see the barn roof above me open. Using the carefully placed ladder, I climb out, aware of the painful weight of the fifth ring strapped to my back. Far above me Sylvia towers. I clamber along the barn's ribs, running faster and faster, then leap through the air and slam into the thick fur of the sleeve of Sylvia's coat. I can feel her step back, startled, and I slip. But I clench my fists tighter into the fur and hang there as her massive head turns to look. She steadies her arm and stretches her palm out, so that I'm able to climb up through the fur and into her hand. I've

done it! Cradled in the hand of my love, I unstrap the harness on my back and hold the massive gold ring in both hands in front of me towards her, looking up into her wonderful face. Another command and my sensorium is focused back in my body and I'm back in the tree looking down at the tiny figure of the tenth lord holding the ring.

"David...?"

"Sylvia. I love you. I've always loved you." She turns as all of the containers open and the twelve monkeys, the eleven dogs, the nine other lords and their nine ladies, the eight maids, the seven swans, the six geese, all look on in silence. The cushion holding the four gold rings sinks to the grass in front of her. The four calling birds land on the tree beside me as the three french hens stand in a line between us, and the two turtle doves gently push Sylvia's head so that she's looking up at me. Only the buzzing of the faerie can be heard as the snow gently falls around us. "Sylvia," I ask as the tenth lord holds out the fifth ring, and a portion of it unfolds to reveal a small diamond. "Will you marry me?"

The doves fly off and circle around Sylvia's head.

My sight blurs as tears begin. She won't—

"David, my dearest partridge in a pear tree! Of course I will!"

Stretching out my wings, I leap out of the tree and land in front of her as all of the automatons break out in cheers and she laughs as I step towards her, but then she falls silent as I wrap my warm wings around her.

And together we kiss.



## CHOICES

MY LIFE SUCKS.

Really.

I'm over forty. No real savings, no real job.

Sure, I piddle around, write some, paint some, do odd jobs to make ends meet. But, eventually I'll have an accident, or I'll get sick, and that'll be it.

People tell me I need to get a real job, or take training. I nod and say yes, but never really do anything. Always I tell myself that I need to get the resume improved, or that I need to do more research, or I tell myself some other excuse that makes perfect logical sense. It only means that I push it off till tomorrow which never comes.

So, why am I telling you this? Why am I wasting the time of a forum dedicated to discussion of transformations?

Obviously, since I'm here, it's because I'm fascinated by transformations. Always have been. Of course, unlike the majority who are fascinated by the process of transformation, including some who are fascinated in ways that I, frankly, find a bit frightening, I'm fascinated by the *results* of a transformation.

What is it like to be something else?

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't hate my human body. I don't think that I'm really a woman in a poorly fitting mansuit, or a fox in an even more poorly fitting humansuit. It's just that I wonder what it'd be like. What would it be like to feel wind blowing through your fur, the motion tugging on your skin all over the place like a full body vibrator? Or what would sounds *feel* like if I could move large ears to cup them and focus

them, to transform the sound from a non-changing monotone to a rich cacophony of vibrations.

I could go on, but you get the idea.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't just slave away at grudge jobs and then come home to a lonely and empty house and sleep. Nope. Actually, I spend most of my time on a wondrous tool called IRC, or more particularly, a transformation chat server. There I can live out my dreams, pretend to be all kinds of things, and chat and interact with those I'm privileged to call friends.

Of course, like the real world, it's not entirely happiness and joy. People are depressed, people are suicidal, and I've done my fucking damndest to make life better for them. That includes anything from being a sounding board for their problems, to encouraging them with ideas and dreams that I'm too afraid, or lazy, to implement for myself, to calling them at two in the morning – local time – to tell them that their lives *mean* something, and that suicide is only the coward's way out.

And yes, I admit I've considered it a time or two when I look around my ramshackle room, but I've never done it and will likely never do it. It's a coward's way out, a betrayal of friends and family.

Anyway, life went on like that for years, not really changing. Friends came and went, but there were always some who stayed, and some who'd always been there. But, as much as we might prefer otherwise, life is not a constant. It is a glorious thing of changes and wiggles and curves, and sometimes the oddest things happen.

Probably not odder than what happened to me.

I didn't notice it at first, or at least I presume I didn't. I was typing away, deeply involved in some silliness. But soon, the glare of sunlight became too bright to be ignored.

Sunlight? How can there be bright sunlight at just past midnight? It'd be time for bed soon, time to get up and drudge away for another day.

So I looked. What else was I to do?

And, believe it or not, there was – well – a *hole*. I guess that's the best way I can describe it. The hole was about two metres in diameter, and visibly growing as I watched. Around it reality was, I guess, crinkled. Squinting, I could see that what I knew was behind the hole, bookshelves, knick-knacks.... It could all still be seen, but crinkled up like a crushed and balled piece of paper.

And inside the hole—

Inside the hole was the archetypal *perfect pristine wilderness*. The green of the leaves and brush and long grass and moss was the most vibrant,

perfect green I'd ever seen, even though each leaf and stalk was its own unique shade. And the same with the browns and beiges of the bark, the blacks and greys of the worm-rich soil, the golden yellows and whites of the glittering shaft of sunlight. And it was actually glittering, like it'd been scattered with drifting dusts and specks of Christmas sparkle.

Centred in the hole, framed like a Renaissance painting, was an achingly thin woman, so thin that she made those malnourished runway models look fat. She had huge almond eyes of a deep compelling blue, a blue so deep that I could feel my soul sinking into them. Her ears were long, arching far above her head and ending in delicate points. Then there were her clothes, her presence—

Words fail.

The hole wavered around the edge as she spoke. "Hail George."

My mouth just hung open.

"Like the wizard in those silly little SRU stories, I'll just state things to keep your little brain from overloading. I hate it when they pop."

Blinking, I just looked.

"I am one of the Tuatha Dé Danaan. Well, that's the closest you know. The tales aren't entirely true." She wagged her long tiger-like tail for emphasis. "I've come for you, George William."

"For— For me?"

"You've helped so many, and we get so lonely here. I'd like you to come and join me."

"Come...."

She laughed, a mocking sound like the tinkling of water in the purest and most isolated of brooks. "Oh, don't think all that! I told you that the tales aren't entirely true. You won't be our slave or plaything. You'll live forever. 'Tis certain that you won't ever be able to return to your drab reality, but nothing is free. That's the truth, right up there with entropy. But, we'll give you the gift you've dreamed of."

"Gift...."

"My, but you *are* tongue tied!" She laughed, a gentle mocking laugh. "Right now you're thinking of us lying, of us luring you here to torture and torment. Nothing of the kind! Why would we want to do that? Sure, we did it once, but it gets so *boring* after a while." Cocking her head, she looked at me. "George, you have a gift. A gift that we lost *far far* too long ago."

"You have *dreams*."

"Dreams...?"

"You have an imagination that we've lost. An imagination that we want to share. To watch and enjoy and get pleasure from."

Sure, I'd written some stories, and there'd been some praise, and a bit of condemnation, but there were so many others so much better—

"Oh, I *know* there're others, dear George, but yours is the imagination that calls to us. Now come, join us here for all time. Join us and we'll gift you with the ability to change, to become whatever you can imagine....

"To transform...."

Words failed me, if they had ever served me at all in this encounter. My mind blossomed in imagined visions of what could be. Of finding out what it *was* like to feel the wind blowing in my fur, to hear the sounds focused and magnified, to feel the ground under soft paws or hard hooves, to swim through the oceans without worrying about holding my breath or the loud gushing of exhaled bubbles, to smell the messages I'd only imagined, but could see dogs driven into orgasmic pleasure by.

"Come George. Come and be with us for as long as you wish. When you're ready, and only then, you can pass from your mortal form and go wherever your soul goes. We're not cruel, George, not like in the tales. We'll take our pleasure from your pleasure."

I forced my mind free of the cascade of images and dreams that we calling me to be made real. "You... you need me?"

Again she laughed, the gentle mocking of falling water. "We don't *need* you, George. What would we want with a mortal? But you would give us some small pleasure, and that is worth such small expenditure as this portal, and our gift, costs us." She looked at me, eyes large and unblinking. "But come, I grow weary, and the expenditure of effort will soon outweigh what small benefit you'd give us."

Helpless, I stood up, the chair creaking on the floor, and then falling over with a loud bang. That cut through the spell, and I glanced over at the monitor, at the chat window.

GEORGE, somebody had typed in a private message, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? DO YOU MIND IF I TALK TO YOU? I'VE HAD A REALLY CRAPPY DAY AND NEED A HUG.

Staring at that, I remembered all the pain I'd helped heal, all the lost souls I'd advised as best I could, helped as best I could. There'd been the odd failure, but much more success. I remembered the friends who counted on me, the promises I'd made to finish stories, to help edit their works. I remembered those who came to me regularly for advice on all kinds of things. And I remembered my friends who lived nearby, whom I spent enjoyable time with. And I remembered family and nephews and cousins, a favourite niece I would write a story for each Christmas, a serial about her that grew and changed from year to year—

My head dragged itself away from the monitor, and I looked at her. Looked at the vibrant green and living world. Looked at where all my dreams could become real for as long as I wished.

"Come on George. We're waiting. Come and live your dreams."

Swallowing, I blinked back tears, my mind full of images of what could be, of *what* I could finally be. Other images fought against them, pushing for attention. Images of friends and family.

The sobbing face of my favourite niece when she heard that I'd vanished, when she finally realized that she'd never see me again—

I couldn't speak, couldn't say yes, couldn't say no. So, I did what I'd always done, I fled.

Turning, I ran, past the equine fursuit I was going to finish some day, yanking open the door and banging it shut behind me. Running through the cold drizzle, worn sneakers thudding on the ground. Sneakers thudding, not hooves clomping or paw-claws clicking—

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I RAN, and then walked. All I know is that I was soaked by the time I came back. I hadn't locked the door behind me, and it creaked open into the cold and empty house. My roommates, whom I almost never saw, were long asleep.

It must have been a dream. It must have.

I made my way into the cold puddle of light around the monitor, and looked at the chair lying on the floor.

And, beside it, green and glistening, though already dying around the edges, a leaf of the most natural, most vibrant, most living green imaginable. Crouching down, I picked it up, feeling it's life between my fingers.

Feeling what could have been as the dreams in my mind shattered against hard reality, stabbing my soul with blinding pain from the sharpness of their shards.

Still holding the leaf, crumpling its life between my fingers, I felt around through a world blurred by tears, picked up the chair and set it upright. And sat down.

Sat down and rejoined the cold real world, a world of pain and fear and sadness.

The real world. A world that was also brightened by love and happiness. A world I was able to make a little less dark by being a caring ear.

A world that I could bring hope to by making a child happy.

I sobbed.



## STAINED GLASS WINDOW

A SQUIRREL CHITTERED AT HIM from behind. George tore his eyes away from the dusty half-finished stained glass window he'd been staring at. Tore his eyes away, blinked at the dust, blinked out the tears. He spun around and— And... there was a real squirrel sitting amongst the row of plush ones lining the shelf. The living creature's eyes glittered as it watched him, the tip of its tail jerking this way, then that. Its whole body was white, pure white, an ivory albino obvious amongst the sea of plush squirrels.

"Linda so loved squirrels—" A sob forced its way out as the squirrel watched. He choked in a breath, fighting for control. He looked right at the squirrel. "You still... still here?"

The squirrel chattered back at him.

"Shoo! Go back outside! This isn't your place."

The creature cocked its head, watching him through black eyes.

"Shoo!"

The squirrel moved like lightning, leaping off the shelf, thudding on the floor. Its claws made clicking sounds as the tiny creature ran. He chased after, but the only sign was the swinging cat door—the way the little thing had gotten in – and a cool draft against the floor from outside. He and Linda had never gotten a cat – she claimed it would kill the squirrels. The door was in the house when they'd bought it a year— Year....

Falling to his knees, his body was choked with sobs. He'd curse the bastard that'd taken her from him six months ago, but she wouldn't have wanted that—

IT WAS A FEW DAYS LATER, and George was back in the living room. He and

Linda had such plans after winning the lottery. Buying the house, making it their own, relaxing and enjoying life. They'd been working on a stained glass window when... the robbery...

He forced the memory away, instead looking down at the pieces of glass and the half filled frame. Fingering a piece, he looked at its sea blue glittering and shining in the afternoon sunlight. As he remembered, it went... there. Putting it down, he turned it round and round, and— And.... Christ, it was the wrong place – wrong God damned place!

It'd been so *easy* when she—

The albino squirrel jumped onto the table and chittered at him.

He blinked. "You?"

He'd have sworn the creature nodded.

"You shouldn't be in here! You—" He sighed, looking at all the plush squirrels watching. "Fine – if you're here, I think I've got some peanuts—"

It watched him, motionless, its eyes black.

He got up expecting it to bolt. It didn't. Instead it watched him go into the kitchen. And when he reached the cupboard, it was there on the counter below watching him. How the hell?

It just stared, tail tip jerking in random directions.

"She'd have loved you, you know—" No! Not that! Not— He forced the memories away, and opened the cupboard with a loud creak. The tin he remembered was still there, and he popped it open, filling the room with the bitter salty scent of the peanuts. He'd never liked them, but she— She....

He dumped the contents of the tin on the counter and ran upstairs.

IT WAS WELL AFTER DARK by the time he came back down. It was into December already. Flicking on the kitchen light he expected to find a mess, but the peanut tin was still upright, the lid beside it, and all the peanuts gone. Well, except for the shells – they were neatly piled on the lid.

If he told anybody, they'd *never* believe it. *Linda* would have done it like that – always – always neat, she— She.... He fled into the living room, turning that light on as he passed. Maybe the stained glass – maybe he should just toss the whole God damned thing! He sat down and picked up the piece he'd tried to place that afternoon. He looked at the incomplete work on the table.

This was useless! Utterly useless! Hopeless!

Hell, even the squirrel knew. It'd come in just to mock him, and then to mooch some free peanuts off him. Stupid squirrel had been sitting right... right... there—

He paused, looking. The— The colors matched. No. Impossible.



Hands shaking, he put the piece right where the squirrel had been.  
And— And—  
It fit.

HE DIDN'T SEE THE SQUIRREL for another week. Not until after he went grocery shopping, making sure to pick up a full tin of peanuts. As usual, he ignored the attempts of the grocery clerk at conversation. He didn't care. The next afternoon he sat down in the living room, and picked up another piece—

The squirrel was there. And hadn't been a moment before. He looked at the squirrel, the piece, the squirrel. He tried shooing the squirrel out of the way, but it just watched. When he tried to push it, it dodged, but was back in an instant so he couldn't see if the piece actually went there.

He sighed. "Payment first?"

The squirrel chattered.

"Okay. Follow me." He got up, the chair scraping on the wooden floor, and walked into the kitchen, the squirrel's claws scratching on the floor behind him. He got the can out along with a small bowl, and poured about a quarter in. The squirrel chattered, and neatly dug in. Shaking his head, George went back to the living room and placed the piece where the squirrel had been. It fit. Then he glued it in place, having glued the other piece in a week ago. He stayed there an hour or so, trying other pieces. No luck, as usual. Sighing, he returned to the kitchen. The bowl was empty, all the shells neatly placed within it.

GEORGE GAVE UP TRYING TO UNDERSTAND. Each day the squirrel would come, show him where one piece went, eat its peanuts, and be gone. It would never leave when he was watching. Even if he stared and stared, he'd get distracted, blink – and it'd be gone.

The tin he'd gotten lasted almost a week, and when it was empty, the squirrel stopped coming. So he went out to get more.

"Like peanuts, eh?" the grocer asked as he put the five tins on the counter.

"Nope. It's for the wife, Linda can't get enough—"

The grocer fell silent, and George had just enough time to pay for his purchase and flee before the tears started.

The squirrel left him alone for two days, before showing up and performing its usual transaction.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH BEGAN CLEAR, but a massive storm front was

moving in. "Storm of the Century," the weather channel was calling it. But then they called everything that. By noon the skies were dark, and snow had started falling, wet and heavy.

The squirrel didn't show up.

George raced to the front door and opened it and— And what? Look for a wild albino squirrel in a snowstorm? Gently he closed the door, filled a big bowl with peanuts, and placed them outside on the porch. The snow would cover them, but what else could he do? The squirrel would be fine. It was a wild animal. Wild animals were *always* okay in storms. Right?

After nuking some instant meal for supper, he ate the tasteless noodles and sauce as he watched some movie on TV. Why? Why did Linda have to die? *Why?*

The screen went dark, the lights went out. In the blackness outside the wind howled, and the heavy snow beat against the window. He hoped the squirrel was okay. God – the poor squirrel—

He felt so helpless! Like he had—

"Linda, I need you back!"

Hours later he was all cried out, and crawled into the huge empty quilt bed. Hours later he got to sleep.

HE WAS IN THE LIVING ROOM, even as the storm howled outside, beating against the window with hungry, futile fury. The only illumination was the warm light of a candle. The window was two thirds done, as he'd left it after the squirrel's last visit. And the squirrel was there, nibbling on a peanut. "Hey, dear!" it chattered.

George didn't question the fact that the squirrel talked. After all, this was a dream.

"I don't have much time, love, so we need to get this done tonight." The squirrel's voice was familiar.... "Now, the next piece goes here," she pointed.

How did he know the squirrel was a she? He picked up the piece, and it went right where indicated. And the voice— the voice....

Dear God – how.... How.... "Lin-Linda?" he asked.

"Just for a little longer. I couldn't leave you like that. Without saying... good bye—"

"I—"

"Now, the next piece goes here," she pointed.

Nodding, he put it there. Same with the next and the next—

They were almost done. "I— I've so much to say, love. But... time... duties. Just one piece left, you can do it yourself. At least I hope you can."

He almost laughed at the warm familiarity of her wry voice.

"Live your life. Love, help, enjoy yourself. I'll be here. In... in your memories, your dreams. Waiting. Always waiting. Just... just live out your time. Live life. I—"

He looked at the little white squirrel as it jumped across the window and hugged his wrist, licking it.

Her body shook as she pulled herself together. "I love you, George."

"LINDA!" GEORGE AWOKE SCREAMING HER NAME. The storm had stopped, the power was back on, the TV flickered with the static of dead air. Shaking he got up, tying a bathrobe around him.

A dream, it had only been a dream. Linda.... Linda was dead. He had to accept that. Had to—

Still trembling he walked downstairs, the stairs creaking under his steady pace. He went into the kitchen and opened the counter to get some peanuts. The squirrel would come by today—

There were seven tins in the cupboard. All that he'd bought, and even the one the squirrel had finished during its first visit.

Slamming the door shut so hard it bounced, he ran into the living room, his bare feet slapping on the floor, his bathrobe being pushed aside by a draft of warm air from one of the radiators. Outside church bells started ringing, welcoming Christmas.

And, in the living room, the stained glass window was done, or almost done. Every piece was in place but the last one. A beautiful picture Linda had talked him into commissioning in glass. A picture of two squirrels holding hands in a tree branch beside a quiet pool, watching the sunset.

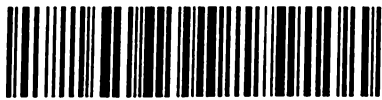
And— And on the window was a single peanut shell, with one peanut left inside.

He sat down. He had no choice; it was all he could do not to fall.

"Good— Good bye, Linda...."







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**What do ancient Greece, Golden Age science fiction,  
horses, and the art of costuming all have in common?**

**Michael W. Bard, of course!**

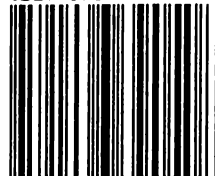
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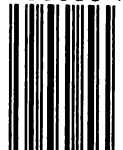
**And when you're done, you'll miss Michael every bit as much as we do.**

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